

LISTENING TO GUARDIANS

Freedom to Speak Up
Guardian Survey 2023

July 2023



**National
Guardian**

Freedom to Speak Up

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About us

The National Guardian's Office and the role of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian were created in response to recommendations made in Sir Robert Francis QC's report "The Freedom to Speak Up" (2015).

Sir Robert found that NHS culture did not always encourage or support workers to speak up, and that patients and workers suffered as a result.

The National Guardian's Office leads, trains and supports a network of Freedom to Speak Up guardians in England and conducts speaking up reviews to identify learning and support improvement of the speaking up culture of the healthcare sector.

There are over a thousand guardians in NHS 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

Freedom to Speak Up guardians support workers to speak up and work within their organisation to tackle barriers to speaking up.

NHS trusts and providers of NHS care subject to the NHS standard contract must appoint a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and follow the National Guardian's Office's (NGO) guidance on speaking up. Other organisations have also introduced the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the Freedom to Speak Up guardians who participated in this survey. We are grateful for their commitment to improvement and generosity of time. Their feedback provides valuable insights into the speaking up landscape across England's healthcare system.

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



Foreword



Since the National Guardian's Office first survey of guardians in 2017, the Freedom to Speak Up network has grown significantly. From 200 guardians, mainly in NHS trusts, there are now over 1,000 guardians working across healthcare, including primary medical services, hospices, the independent sector, and national bodies. This growth signifies the increasing recognition of the importance of Freedom to Speak Up for all organisations who want to do their best for colleagues and for people using services.

The survey takes a temperature check of the speaking up culture within organisations as perceived by Freedom to Speak Up guardians. Through their role of listening to workers and speaking truth to power, guardians have a unique insight into the health of the Speak Up culture in their organisations.

This temperature check serves as an early warning sign of cultural issues in the sector. Our report looking at the results can serve as a tool for improvement by highlighting areas of concern that impact upon worker wellbeing, retention, and ultimately, the quality and safety of care and services.

Freedom to Speak Up culture

In previous years, a consistent majority of guardians who responded - ranging from 82 per cent in 2018 to 73 per cent in 2021 - believed that the Freedom to Speak Up culture in healthcare was improving. But this year's survey reveals for the first time that those who think there has been an improvement are in the minority (45%).

While the majority of responding guardians still hold a positive view of the culture within their own organisations, there has been a decline in the number of guardians who perceive improvement internally over the past year. Over three quarters of the Freedom to Speak Up guardians who responded (78%) said speaking up was taken seriously in their organisations, but this figure was down six percentage points compared to results in 2020.

This decline in perceptions concerns me, as it should all leaders, whether they are providers, regulators, or government. So much work has been undertaken since the Freedom to Speak Up Review¹, but I fear that in this atmosphere of huge challenge for the sector, we are not always hearing what matters, and what can help us improve – the voices of our people.

¹ <http://freedomtospeakup.org.uk/the-report/>

Taking action

It takes time to build trust. These results show that nurturing a Speak Up culture is a long-game. It is positive to note that 84 per cent of respondents said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers to speaking up, a nine percentage point increase compared to the previous surveys results, and three-quarters of respondents said retaliation as a result of speaking up was not tolerated.

But, speaking up can only be seen as worthwhile if listening up and following up takes place. That is why I am concerned that Freedom to Speak Up guardians' responses reflect those of the National Staff Survey: that a sense that speaking up for too many may seem futile and is fast becoming the most significant barrier to making speaking up business as usual.

Almost two-thirds of respondents (66%) identified the concern that nothing will be done was a barrier to workers in their organisation speaking up. This is an eight percentage point increase compared to responses to the previous survey (58%) and puts feelings of futility on a par with the fear of detriment as the main barrier to speaking up.

As one Guardian said: “... *it is hard in conversations with those who speak up about safe staffing levels as there isn't the available staff and whilst short term fixes are generally found the bigger long-term issue is not addressed and... Speaking Up feels futile.*”

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian wellbeing

This is having an impact on the wellbeing of guardians, who as a result are feeling that they are not always meeting the needs of the workforce. While the overwhelming majority feel valued by workers, there was a seven-percentage point fall in those who thought they were meeting their needs, down from 72 per cent in 2021/22 to 65 per cent in 2022/23. Some of the cases which guardians hear are complex and emotional; people may be feeling angry and distressed. Sometimes there are complex mental health issues involved, feelings of suicide, experiences of sexual harassment. Forty-four per cent said that the role had reduced their health and wellbeing, so clinical supervision and adequate support is essential.

For guardians to fulfil their role effectively, meaningful support from leaders is vital. This means not only providing them with the necessary time and resources, but also ensuring that they are supported emotionally and with sufficient training, including the time to keep up to date with their mandatory training from the National Guardian's Office.

As the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network develops, we are seeing an increased professionalisation in the role. Encouragingly, there are positive movements in terms of increased investment in terms of time and banding, but we would like to see this considered more consistently across the sector.

Despite these challenges, eight out of ten guardians who responded said they would recommend the role to a friend or colleague. In the words of one Freedom to Speak Up Guardian: *“I feel satisfied that I am helping others, especially when they have no one else to turn to. The job can be difficult and draining sometimes but knowing that people can come to us for support makes it worthwhile.”*

To me, this underlines the qualities of those who step up to undertake this important, but often isolating role – their openness to listen to all workers and their resilience in speaking truth to power in the most challenging of circumstances.

In order to reap the benefits which speaking up can bring, it is vital that it is welcomed as a tool for improvement. Yet Freedom to Speak Up guardians are reporting a decline in how valued they feel by managers and senior leaders, which is now at a four-year low.

This response from one guardian highlights the impact of these systemic issues: *“Staff in the NHS and healthcare are on the brink of crash and burn. Depression, anxiety, stress and burnout are at their highest levels. Staff are scared to raise concerns and ignored when they do. Managers feel that as the guardian is in post they don't have to do anything. Senior leaders are the same. If I challenge I am shot down and belittled, I have no fight left in me. I can't do any more.”*

This is painful to read, and as the National Guardian, I too am raising my voice to call for urgent action to be taken to focus on the wellbeing of the workforce. Our report highlights the need for continuous attention to nurturing a speak up culture. This responsibility falls on everyone, requiring each conversation and action to contribute to fostering an environment where speaking up is highly valued and heard. It cannot be solely reliant on the efforts of Freedom to Speak Up guardians. Their role alone cannot drive the transformation of the speaking up culture in healthcare. It is only by us all making this our own personal responsibility, that we can make speaking up business as usual.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jayne', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark

National Guardian for the NHS

Key findings

Speak up culture

- Forty-five per cent of respondents said that there had been an improvement in the speaking up culture in the healthcare sector over the last 12 months. Over a quarter (26%) said the speak up culture in healthcare had deteriorated. This was a sharp decline compared to previous years when most respondents consistently reported improvements in the speaking up culture in the healthcare sector (73% 2021, 80% 2020).
- Fifty-nine per cent of respondents said the speaking up culture in their organisation had improved over the last 12 months. Twelve per cent said it had deteriorated. In comparison, three quarters of respondents in the previous survey said the culture in their organisation had improved in the preceding 12 months.
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) said that senior leaders supported workers to speak up, a three-percentage point decrease compared to the results of the previous survey (71%, 2021).
- Over half of respondents (51%) said managers supported workers to speak up. Fifteen per cent disagreed.
- Sixty-nine per cent of respondents said that speaking up was used in their organisation to identify learning and make improvements. Sixty-seven per cent agreed that there was assurance about the speaking up culture and arrangements, and a plan to improve it.

Barriers to speaking up

- Fifty-one per cent of respondents said workers in their organisation felt safe to speak up about anything that concerned them.
- Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said that disadvantageous and/or demeaning treatment as a result of speaking up was not tolerated in their organisation. Nonetheless, most respondents (66%) perceived the fear of detriment as having a noticeable or very strong impact as a barrier to workers in their organisation speaking up.
- Two-thirds of respondents (67%) identified futility (i.e. the concern that nothing will be done) as being a 'noticeable' or 'very strong' barrier to workers in their organisation speaking up. This was an eight percentage point increase compared to responses to the previous survey (58% 2021).
- Eighty-four per cent of respondents said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers to speaking up, a nine percentage point increase compared to the previous survey's results (75%, 2021).

- Two thirds (66%) of respondents described the actions taken to tackle barriers as somewhat or very effective, down 14 percentage points since the results of the previous survey (80%, 2021).

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role

- 78% said they would recommend the role to a friend
- Forty-four per cent (44%) of respondents stated that the role had reduced their health and wellbeing, either somewhat or greatly. This is a decrease of five percentage points compared to the results of the previous survey, (49%).
- Three-quarters (74%) of respondents felt valued by senior leaders, down nine percentage points (83% 2021). Two-thirds felt valued by managers, down six percentage points (72% 2021).
- Ninety-six per cent of respondents felt valued by the individuals who came to them for support and 85 per cent felt valued by workers in their organisations more generally. However, there was a seven percentage point fall in those who thought they were meeting the needs of workers in their organisation, down from 72 per cent in 2021 to 65 per cent in 2023.
- Seven out of ten (70%) respondents had some ring-fenced time to carry out their role (66% 2021, 70% 2020). Among those supporting NHS trusts, that figure rose to 84 per cent.
- A quarter of the respondents had more than four days per week of ring-fenced time. Among those supporting NHS trusts, 40 per cent had more than four days per week to carry out their role, an increase of 14 percentage points since the 2021 survey.

Section 1: About this survey

For the last six years, we have annually surveyed Freedom to Speak Up guardians in order to gain insight into the implementation of the Freedom to Speak Up guardian role and how this could be improved.

Respondents' feedback has helped 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.

This report focuses on Freedom to Speak Up guardians' answers to the 2023 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian survey.

Please see [here](#) for reports from our previous surveys.

In response to feedback from Freedom to Speak Up guardians, we moved the 2022 survey from September – October to January – February 2023. We invited 950 Freedom to Speak Up guardians to participate in the survey, which was open from 12 January to 9 February 2022. Almost 40 per cent (39%, or 368 guardians) of those invited took part in the survey.

All survey questions were voluntary, and so the number of responses to each question varied. Results are shown as a percentage of the total number of responses to each question.

Please see [here](#) for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2023 Question List.

The reference sheets containing the results for these sections of the report are available [here](#)

All references in this report to Freedom to Speak Up guardians refer to Freedom to Speak Up guardians registered and trained by the National Guardian's Office.

Our survey included questions to gather respondents' perspectives on our support and offers for Freedom to Speak Up guardians. We will share these results with the guardians later this year.

Among Freedom to Speak Up guardians, a minority (45%) provide support to NHS trusts. The majority of Freedom to Speak Up guardians support other types of organisations, such as independent healthcare providers and primary medical services. However, despite this distribution, the voices of these non-NHS trust Freedom to Speak Up guardians remained underrepresented in our survey, with the majority of respondents (58%) supporting NHS trusts.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians supporting primary medical services (PMS)²

Fourteen per cent of Freedom to Speak Up guardians trained and registered with the National Guardian's Office support primary medical services (PMS). In comparison, Freedom to Speak Up guardians that support PMS accounted for five per cent of those participating in our survey.

Even where guardians are in place in primary medical services, levels of speaking up to them remains low.

The updated national Freedom to Speak Up policy and updated Freedom to Speak Up guide and improvement tool apply to primary care, secondary care and more widely in health and care systems. The National Guardian's Office and NHS England have also issued information clarifying the expectations of integrated care boards (ICBs) and integrated care systems (ICSs)³ in relation to Freedom to Speak Up.

Building on our work exploring the introduction of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role in Primary Care and Integrated Settings⁴, the National Guardian's Office and NHS England have been working with Freedom to Speak Up guardians and a group of ICBs to better understand the successes and practical challenges of Freedom to Speak Up in primary care with a view to creating a menu of support for organisations and integrated care systems.

Based on this work, we plan to share further information by 31 March 2024 about the precise expectations of ICBs in regard to Freedom to Speak Up for primary care workers and across their system.

Most Freedom to Speak Up guardians support organisations regulated by England's health and social care regulator, the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The CQC gives one of four ratings to services: outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate.

² Primary medical services includes general practice, community pharmacy, dental, and optometry (eye health) services

³ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/freedom-to-speak-up/integrated-care-boards-integrated-care-systems-and-freedom-to-speak-up/>

⁴ <https://nationalguardian.org.uk/2021/06/03/exploring-freedom-to-speak-up-in-primary-care-and-integrated-settings/>

Half of respondents (50%) supported organisations rated good or outstanding overall by the CQC - see figure 1.⁵

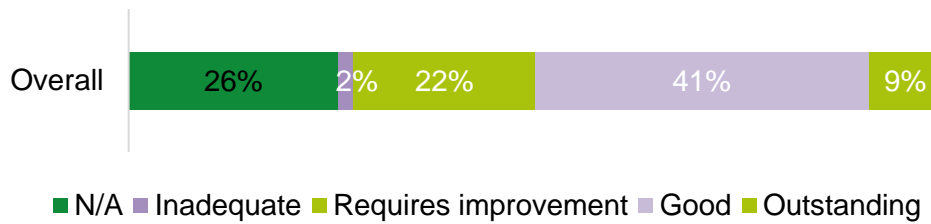


Figure 1. Responses by CQC Ratings

Forty-six per cent of respondents supported organisations with fewer than 5,000 workers, whereas 14 per cent supported ‘large’ organisations with more than 10,000 workers – see figure 2.

We did not have data for organisation size for 10 per cent of respondents.

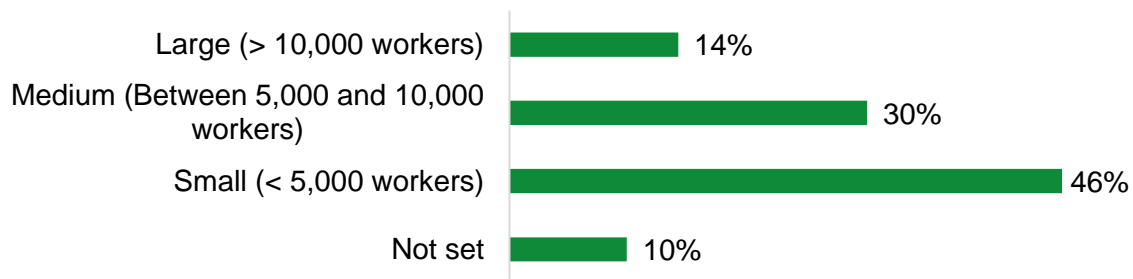


Figure 2. Responses by size of organisation

Respondents included Freedom to Speak Up guardians from organisations based in all regions, as well as multi-regional or national organisations.

⁵ Figures with response options selected by fewer than five respondents have been suppressed to protect participants’ anonymity.

Section 2: Speak Up culture and arrangements

A healthy speaking up culture is characterised by an environment where everybody feels safe, supported, and empowered to raise concerns, share ideas, and contribute to the improvement of the organisation.

We asked respondents to share their views as to whether and how the speak up culture in the healthcare sector and in their organisation specifically had changed in the preceding 12 months.

In previous years, a consistent majority of respondents said that the speaking up culture in the healthcare sector had improved – ranging from a high of 82 per cent in 2018 to 73 per cent in 2021. For the first time, respondents who reported an improvement in the speak up culture in the healthcare sector were in the minority – see figure 3.

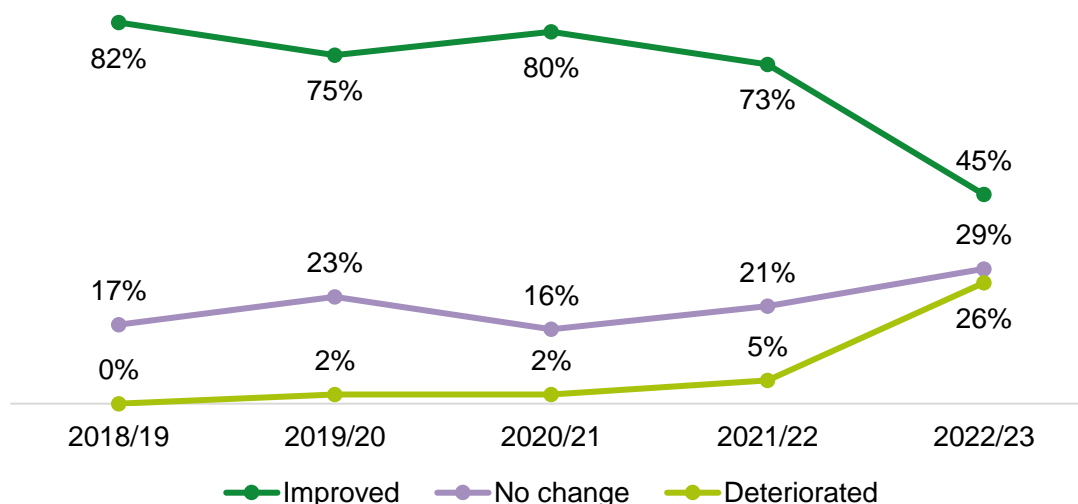


Figure 3. Freedom to Speak Up culture has improved in the last 12 months in the healthcare sector

Forty-five per cent of respondents said the Freedom to Speak Up culture in healthcare had improved in the last 12 months. Over a quarter (26%) said it had worsened.

Figure 4 (below) demonstrates a similar decline in the percentage of respondents who reported an improvement in the Freedom to Speak Up culture of their own organisation over the past 12 months. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents said the culture had improved, down from 75 per cent in 2021. Twelve per cent said it had deteriorated, up from five per cent in 2021.

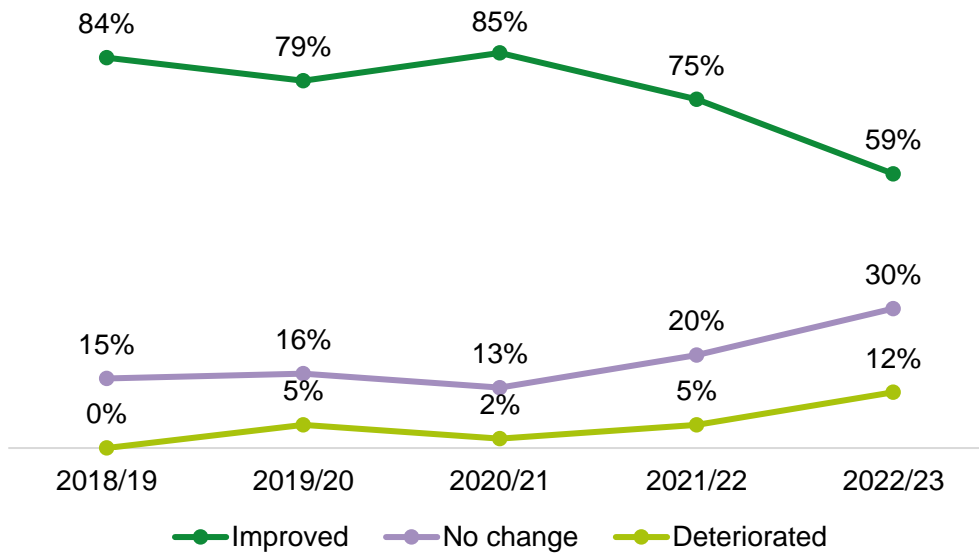


Figure 4: Freedom to Speak Up culture has improved in the last 12 months in my organisation

More encouragingly, two-thirds (66%) of respondents said their organisation had a positive culture of speaking up which is an increase of seven percentage points from 2021 – see figure 5.

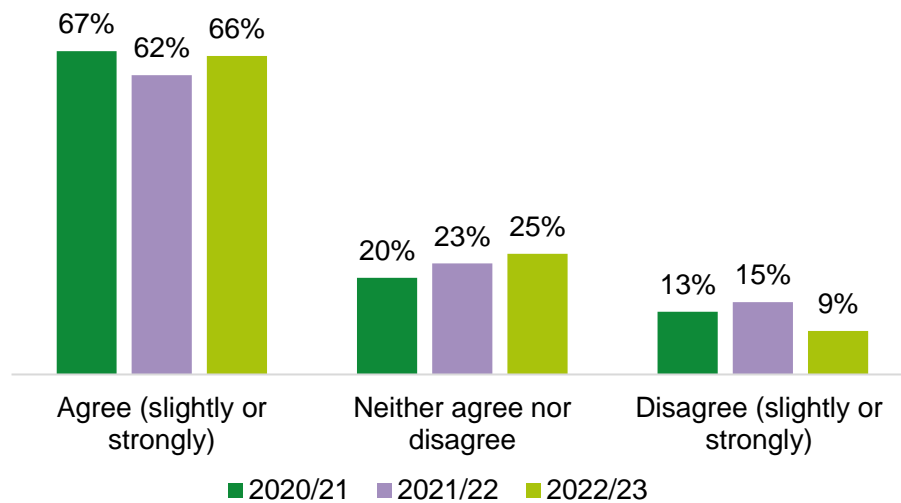


Figure 5: Organisation has a positive culture of speaking up

While most respondents (78%) said speaking up was taken seriously in the organisations they were supporting, this figure was down six percentage points compared to results in 2020 – see figure 6.

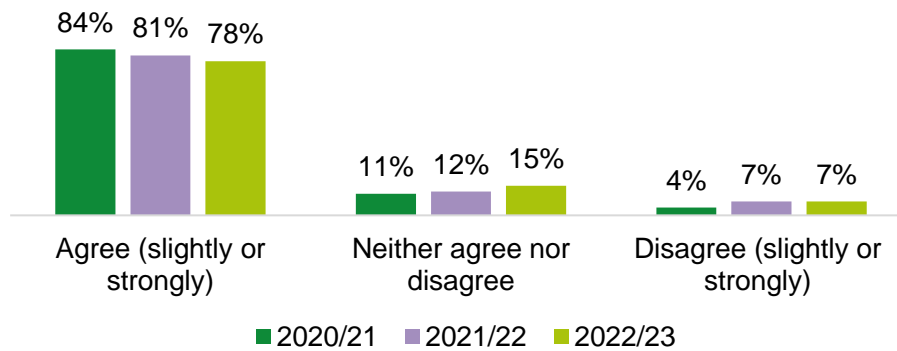


Figure 6: Speaking up is taken seriously in the organisation I support

Respondents shared their perception of the various aspects of speaking up culture and arrangements in their organisations, which we have grouped thematically as:

1. Knowledge, ability and the feeling of safety
2. Listening and acting
3. Learning and improving

Knowledge, ability and the feeling of safety

In a healthy Speak Up culture, workers need to know how to speak up, be given the means to do so and feel safe to voice their views.

Knowledge

When we asked respondents about the extent to which not knowing how to speak up acted as a barrier for workers in their organisation, four in five (80%) stated that it had very little or no impact – see figure 7. This suggests that respondents generally believed that workers in their organisation possessed the knowledge of how to speak up.

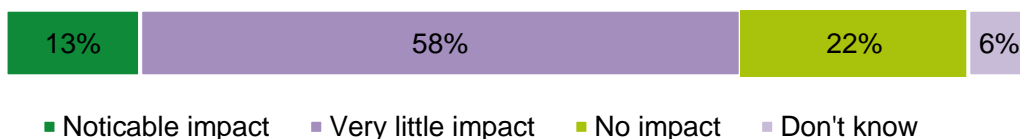


Figure 7: Not knowing how to speak up as a barrier (2022/23)

Ability

Workers also need to have the means to be able to speak up. What this looks like will depend on the individual organisation; for example, some workers may not have access to a computer in an otherwise computer-centric organisation, others may be excluded due to shift-patterns.

Almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents perceived this as having little or no impact as a barrier to speaking up for workers in their organisation – see figure 8.

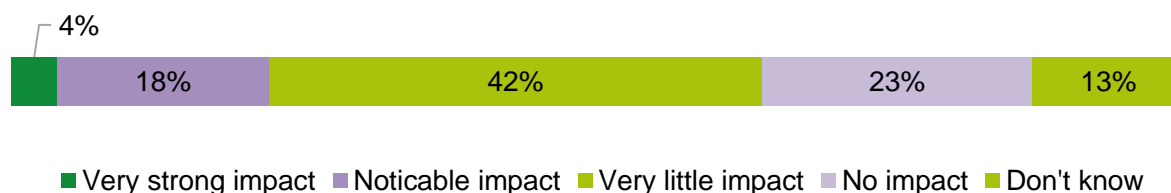


Figure 8: Working arrangements as a barrier (2022/23)

Feeling safe

In comparison to their responses regarding the knowledge and means of workers in their organisation to speak up, a reduced percentage of respondents – 51 per cent - indicated agreement when asked about whether workers felt *safe* to speak up about anything that concerned them in their organisation – see figure 9⁶

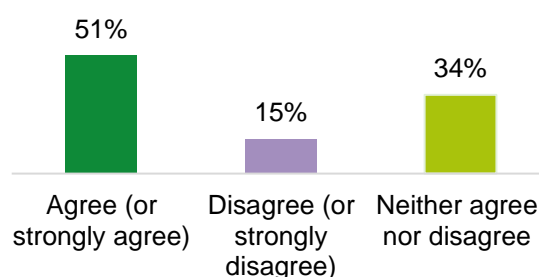


Figure 9. Workers feel able to speak up about anything that concerns them (2022/23)

Being able to speak up without suffering detriment – without any disadvantageous or demeaning treatment resulting from speaking up - is vital to the feeling of safety.⁷

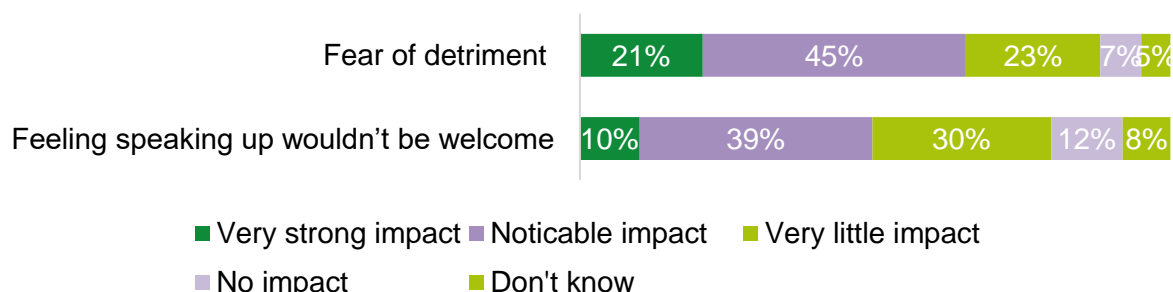


Figure 10. To what degree do the following act as barriers to speaking up for workers in your organisation? (2022/23)

Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said that disadvantageous and/or demeaning treatment as a result of speaking up was not tolerated in their organisation. Despite this, two-thirds of respondents (66%) perceived the fear of detriment as having a noticeable or very strong impact as a barrier to workers in their organisation speaking up. Almost half of respondents (49%) thought that feeling that speaking up

⁶ When we asked about respondents' views on whether workers in their organisations felt safe to speak up about any concerns, it was explicitly clarified that this included workers who faced barriers to speaking up due to their protected characteristics.

⁷ Disadvantageous and demeaning treatment due to speaking up may include being ostracised, given unfavourable shifts, overlooked for promotion, or moved from a team. It can be a deliberate act or a failure to act (i.e., an omission).

would not be welcome had a noticeable or very strong impact as a barrier – see figure 10, above. Respondents shared information about steps being taken to tackle detriment:

"Board development session on the "fear of speaking up and detriment" - a number of actions being put in place to afford more protection to staff, root out the areas where speaking up is not welcomed and identify problem areas."

"Openly talking about zero tolerance of detriment."

'Case study which has been used to educate management the detrimental effects/barriers to speaking up of FY1[Junior doctor]'

'Team meeting attendance explaining confidentiality and we will not tolerate adverse reactions to those who speak up'

Characteristics

Respondents shared their views as to the extent to which attitudes towards certain characteristics acted as a barrier to workers in their organisations speaking up – see figure 11.

- **Professional hierarchies:** This year a greater proportion of respondents said that attitudes to professional hierarchies were a barrier to speaking up.
- **Seniority:** Similar results as for professional hierarchies.
- **Protected characteristics:** Over a third (34%) of respondents said that attitudes towards protected characteristics have an impact on workers feeling able to speak up.

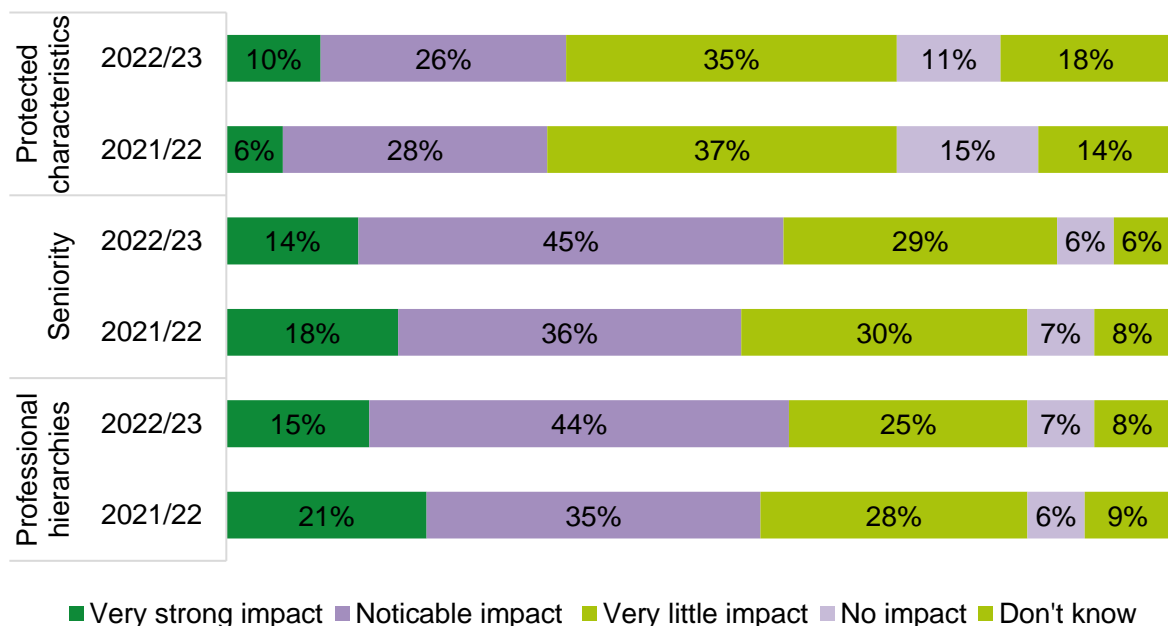


Figure 11: To what degree do the following act as barriers to speaking up for workers in your organisation? Attitudes towards...

Recording characteristics

Understanding the characteristics of the person speaking up can potentially shed light on barriers to speaking up. These may include 'protected characteristics' such as age, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, as well as other factors like the person's contractual relationship (for example, students, agency workers, volunteers) or their work shift patterns (for example, night shift workers).

Collecting this information can help organisations understanding of the reach of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian across the organisation and identify groups that may be using the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian route more or less frequently.

For the first time, we included a question in our survey regarding whether respondents record information about the protected characteristics of individuals who speak up to them, and if so, which characteristics they record.

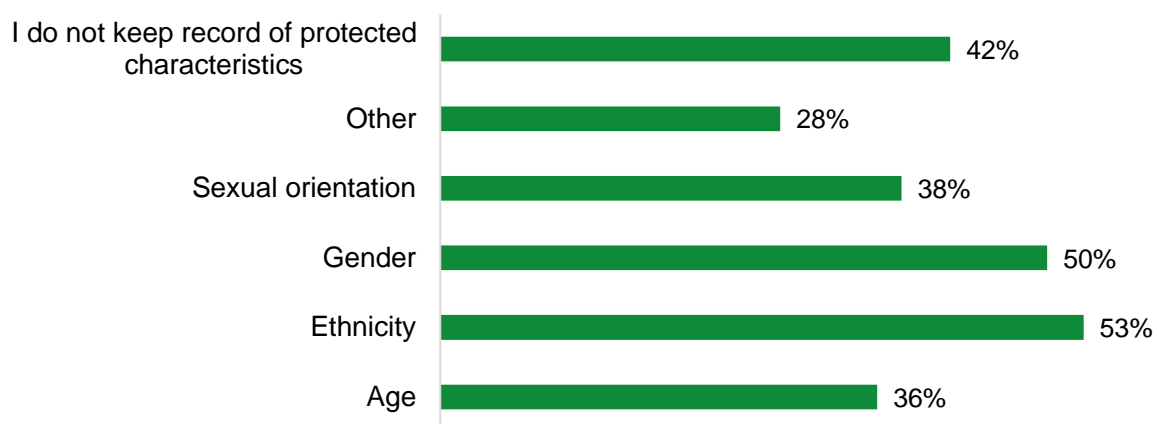


Figure 12. Which of the following characteristics of the workers who speak up do you keep a record of? (2022/23)

Overall, respondents had varying approaches to collecting and recording worker characteristics, influenced by factors such as relevance, capacity, and appropriateness. At least half of the Freedom to Speak Up guardians who responded said they collected information on ethnicity (53%) and gender (50%), respectively. Forty-two per cent (42%) of respondents did not collect information on protected characteristics.

Several said they did not keep a record of these characteristics due to low number of cases, limited capacity, or the perceived lack of relevance. Some respondents mentioned not seeking or recording this information for every worker speaking up, focusing only on relevant characteristics related to the cases being raised and only recorded this information if it was shared or deemed appropriate. Certain characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, were not always asked for, especially if the worker was distressed.

Some Freedom to Speak Up guardians who responded mentioned that there were challenges in collating the data and keeping records of these characteristics.

Where information was captured, some reported that this was volunteered or disclosed during initial discussions with a worker speaking up. Many respondents asked workers to provide information on their characteristics through feedback forms or satisfaction surveys but acknowledged that not everyone provided this information. Some mentioned future plans to collect information from other sources, such as the Electronic Staff Record (ESR).

Recording Cases and Reporting Data: Guidance for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

In accordance with guidance from the National Guardian's Office (NGO), Freedom to Speak Up guardians are required to maintain records of all cases of speaking up that are raised with them. These records serve several purposes, including helping guardians keep a comprehensive track of the issues brought forward and the actions taken in response.

The NGO plans to conduct a review of its guidance in collaboration with Freedom to Speak Up guardians and other stakeholders this year (2023-24). This review aims to enhance the guidance and ensure its alignment with the evolving needs of a growing and diverse Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network as well as good practices in promoting a culture of speaking up.

Listening and acting

In previous surveys, we observed that smaller percentages of respondents had confidence in managers' support for various aspects of Freedom to Speak Up.⁸ When workers need to voice their concerns or share important information, it is often their line managers who they first approach. It is therefore crucial that managers at all levels receive support and training to listen, take appropriate actions and use the received information for learning and improvement. Without this support, managers may respond poorly when employees do speak up, especially if the feedback feels personal or challenges their role.

⁸ [Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2020](#)

Listening

Respondents shared their views of the support for workers to speak up among different groups in their organisation (figure 13).

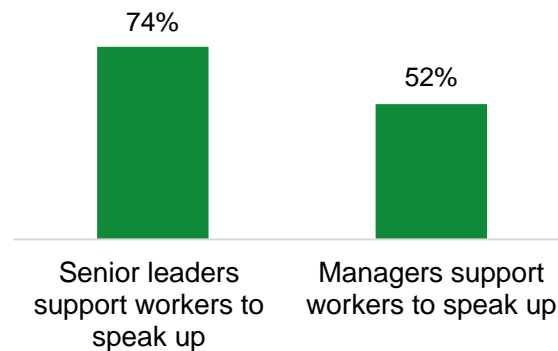


Figure 13: Percentage agreeing with the statements (2022/23)

Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) thought that senior leaders supported workers to speak up, up three percentage points compared to the last survey (71%, 2021) – though there was a 13 percentage point drop in those who ‘strongly agreed’ that senior leaders supported workers to speak up – see figure 14, below.

Seven per cent of respondents said that senior leaders did not support workers to speak up. One in five (20%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

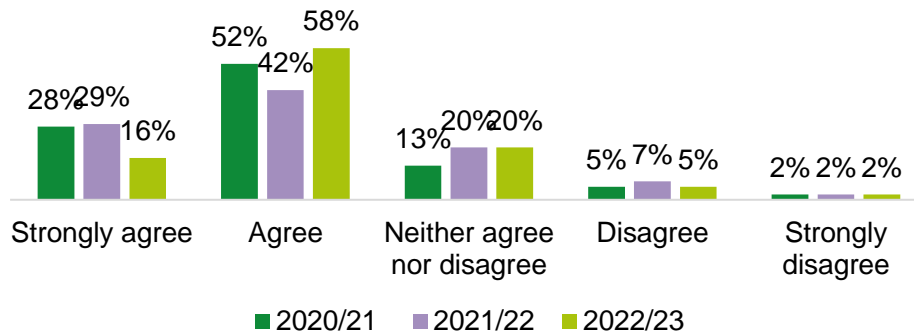


Figure 14: Senior leaders support workers to speak up

A smaller proportion (52%) of respondents said that managers supported workers to speak up – see figure 15, below. Fifteen per cent disagreed and the remaining 33 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed (figure 15).

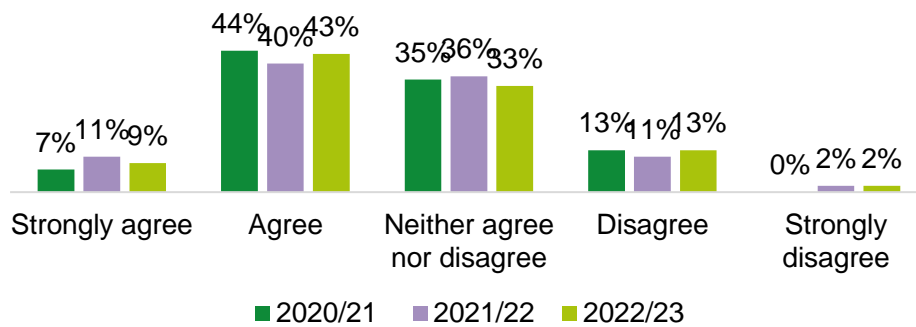


Figure 15: Managers support workers to speak up

Respondents also shared their views on the following aspects of the speaking up culture and arrangements in their organisation – see figure 16, below.



Figure 16: To what extent do you agree with the following statements - % agreed/strongly agreed (2022/23)

Most respondents (91%) said that the confidentiality of those who speak up was appropriately respected and 87 per cent said that matters raised anonymously were responded to and actioned as much as possible.⁹

‘Putting minds at rest that there will be no reprisal if colleagues speak up. 100% confidentiality. No finger pointing or singling out. Allowing the culture to speak up is not frightening.’

Eighty-five per cent of respondents said that policies and processes supported speaking up. The same proportion said that cases were handled in accordance with good practice, policies and processes and legal obligations.

⁹ Anonymous cases are those where the person speaking up is unwilling or feels unable to reveal their identity to you - you do not know who they are. Where someone speaks up confidentially, they reveal their identity to someone on the condition that it will not be disclosed further without their consent (unless legally required to do so).

Acting

In this year’s survey, there was a 10 percentage point increase in respondents identifying futility – the belief that appropriate action would not be taken if someone spoke up - as having a noticeable or very strong impact as a barrier. Two-thirds of respondents (67%) identified futility as having a noticeable or very strong impact.

Futility has surpassed fear of detriment (66%, 2023) as the barrier most often identified as having a noticeable or very strong impact on workers speaking up.

*‘... it is hard in conversations with those who speak up about safe staffing levels as there isn't the available staff and whilst short term fixes are generally found the bigger long-term issue is not addressed and...
Speaking Up feels futile.’*

Eighty-four per cent of respondents said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers to speaking up, a nine percentage point increase since our previous survey (75%, 2021) – see figure 17.

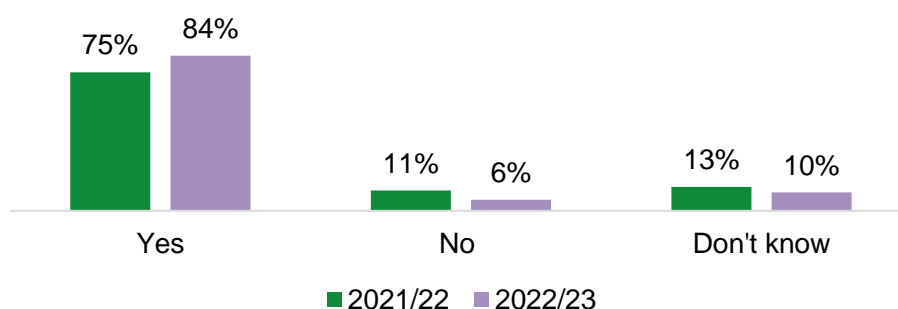


Figure 17: Are organisations taking action to tackle barriers?

Two-thirds (66%) of respondents who said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers described the actions as somewhat or very effective – see figure 18, below.

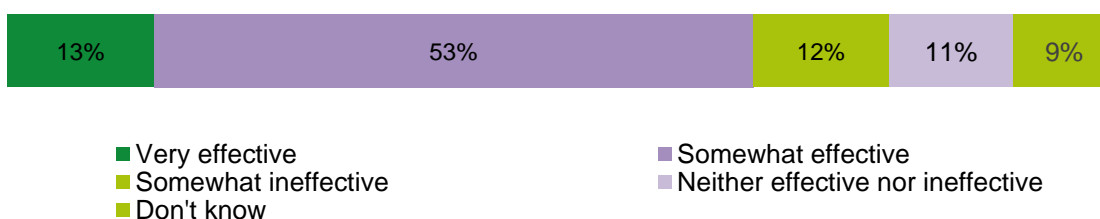


Figure 18. How effective are the actions to tackle barriers? (2022/23)

Learning and improvement

Establishing policies and processes to support speaking up may seem straightforward. However, for policies to translate into culture requires a growth mindset which seeks to foster psychological safety and promotes speaking up as a learning opportunity. By recognising and actively working to address barriers to speaking up, organisations can foster an environment where speaking up becomes a catalyst for positive change and continuous improvement.

Sixty-nine per cent of respondents said that speaking up was used in their organisation to identify learning and make improvements. Sixty-seven per cent agreed that there was assurance about the speaking up culture and arrangements, and a plan to improve it (figure 19).

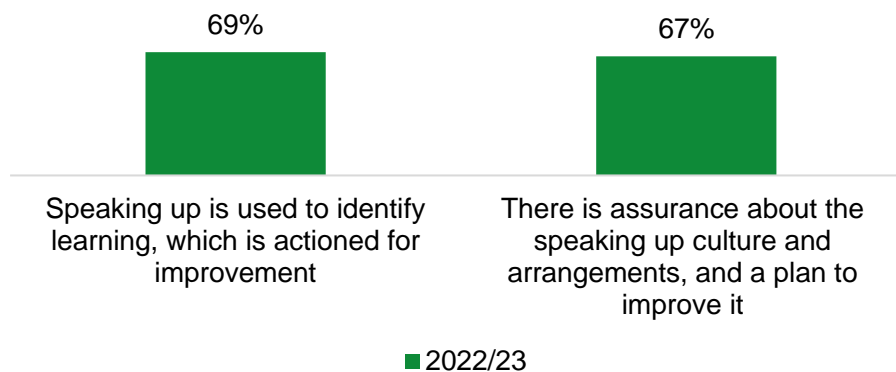


Figure 19: % agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statement

'There is a significant lack of engagement and action from the areas of the organisation that need to be responsive and supportive. They need to be open to learn and improve, as well as to address issues that are impacting people within the workplace otherwise the Freedom to Speak Up role cannot achieve its objectives, and nothing changes for the individuals affected and involved within the organisation. It is very frustrating as a Guardian that we are also being ignored and not heard or supported as a result of this.'

Speaking up is a gift; it is a gift of information which can lead to learning and improvement. The benefits of Freedom to Speak Up can only be realised if leaders and board members are inquisitive about what is presented to them and are keen to embrace the learning which listening to those who speak up can bring.

By seeking assurance about the speaking up culture, leaders can identify areas for growth and develop strategies to address any concerns or challenges. This proactive approach could contribute to positive changes and realise the benefits which listening to workers can bring.

Recommendations

Our findings indicate that, while Freedom to Speak Up guardians reported feeling most workers know how to speak up, there are actual or perceived barriers to them doing so. Respondents identified factors such as a feeling of futility and fear of retaliation as key obstacles affecting workers' ability to speak up. These findings align with the 2022 NHS Staff Survey outcomes, as detailed in our recent report looking at the Freedom to Speak Up (Raising Concerns) sub-score.¹⁰

Freedom to Speak Up guardians responding to our survey also reported lower levels of agreement regarding managerial support for Freedom to Speak Up, with just over half (52%) saying that managers support workers to speak up. Less than 70% agreed with the statement that there was assurance about the speaking up culture and arrangements in their organisation, including plans for improvement. This is a responsibility for senior leaders, and a governance duty for boards.

The deterioration of confidence noted in both this survey and the NHS Staff Survey, underscores the need for improved understanding of the benefits of speaking up and the responsibilities as leaders of those in management positions.

Our Freedom to Speak Up eLearning¹¹, developed in association with Health Education England, is for all healthcare workers, managers and leaders to help them understand the vital role they play and the support available to encourage a healthy speaking up culture for the benefit of patients and workers.

In light of these findings, we recommend that leaders:

- **Mandate Speak Up training for all workers, prioritising those responsible for responding to colleagues' concerns.**
This will equip managers with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively listen and follow up when workers speak up. It is equally crucial that senior leaders lead by example and undertake this training themselves. To embed this training, discussions with those responsible for responding to workers' concerns should take place post-training to encourage reflection on the learnings and explore practical ways to apply these insights in their roles.
- Working with their Freedom to Speak Up guardians, they should **identify and initiate a plan to address barriers to speaking up** in their organisation, particularly the perception of futility and fear of retaliation.

¹⁰ [Fear and Futility: what does the staff survey tell us about speaking up in the NHS? - National Guardian's Office](#)

¹¹ [Training - National Guardian's Office](#)

Section 3: Implementation

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.

Organisations determine how the role(s) will be implemented to meet the expectations of the universal job description¹² within the unique context of their organisation.

Appointment

All roles should be appointed based on fair and open competition, and the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role is no exception. This allows for the appointment of the best candidates and makes it more likely that workers will have confidence in their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, including their impartiality and ability to handle conflicts of interest.

Eighty-one per cent of respondents said they were appointed through fair and open competition, up three percentage points since 2021 (78%) – see figure 20.

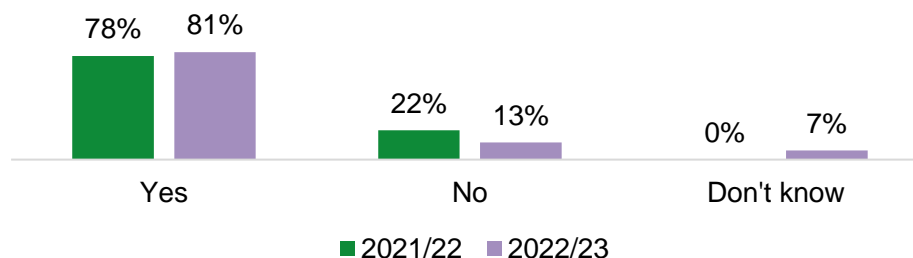


Figure 20. Were you appointed through open and fair competition?

There was a marked difference in responses when broken down by the type of organisation that the respondents supported:

- 92 per cent of respondents supporting NHS trusts stating that they were appointed through an open and fair competition.
- 65 per cent of those supporting other organisations said the same.

This variation is likely attributable to the fact that the guardian role was initially implemented within NHS trusts, resulting in a relatively more mature and embedded position within these organisations, including fair and open appointment of guardians.

¹² [Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Job Description](#)

We asked respondents who had not been appointed through fair and open competition to expand on their response. Most of the comments we received indicated that the respondents were individually approached and asked to take on the role. In some cases, this was because their pre-existing role was thought to be closely aligned with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role:

'I was directly selected to be Freedom to Speak Up Guardian as the company needed one - I was not given much choice in the matter either, nor offered any benefits for the additional work.'

'Agreed as part of my job description and due to the experience/length of service and how staff perceive me as a trusted confidante.'

Leaders should take proactive measures to ensure that people's protected characteristics, such as ethnicity, do not serve as barriers, either in reality or perception, to becoming a Freedom to Speak Up guardian. This means implementing a fair and open recruitment process with appropriate safeguards against bias. Leaders should consider broader cultural factors and address any potential barriers that may discourage people from applying or considering the role. (See figure 46 which illustrates the ethnic demographic of Freedom to Speak Up guardians who responded to this survey).

Models of Guardian provision

As the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role has become more embedded within organisations, and leaders have examined the amount of time needed in order for the role to be effective, we have seen different models develop of guardian provision.

We sought information from respondents on these arrangements, including structures and job titles. Broadly, we identified three models based on respondents' feedback:

Model One: Many respondents were the sole guardian in their organisation, sometimes supported by a network of Freedom to Speak Up champions or ambassadors.

Some respondents expressed concerns about this model's impact on guardians' wellbeing, particularly in larger organisations.

Model Two: Some respondents were part of a team consisting of two or more guardians within their organisation. As with Model One, these networks were sometimes supported by a network of Freedom to Speak Up champions/ambassadors.

These guardians tended to share the same band/grade/seniority level and had the same job description. They might divide the workload, take responsibility for some geographical regions, and even share jobs.

Model Three: Some organisations had a 'lead' Guardian accompanied by one or more 'deputy' or 'associate' guardians. Although these terms were commonly used by respondents, there were variations, such as 'advisory' guardians. There were also instances where guardians were dedicated to specific services or specialisms.

The responsibilities and roles of lead guardians and their deputies/associates differed across organisations. In some organisations, there were three levels of guardian roles: lead > deputy > associate. As with model two, the Guardian team in model three tended to assign responsibility for, for example, particular geographical areas/sites to specific guardians.

In general, lead guardians (or equivalent) held more senior positions compared to their deputies/associates and had more dedicated time for the Guardian role. They also tended to be tasked with, among other things, strategic aspects of the role as well as reporting to the board (or equivalent). Nonetheless, there was no indication in respondents' feedback that 'lead guardians' - or others that were trained and registered with the National Guardian's Office - did not undertake the reactive aspects of the role, responding to workers speaking up to them.

Some respondents mentioned the existence of fixed-term contracts in the context of model two and three networks, which were periodically reviewed to assess their effectiveness. Both Model Two and Model Three networks included guardians with diverse professional backgrounds. This potential positive was also mentioned in the context of Freedom to Speak Up champion/ambassador networks (see Figure 23 below).

"Three of us cover what's needed between us. People approach who they prefer."

Across all models, administrative assistants were also mentioned as part of some local networks to facilitate the functioning of these teams.

Feedback indicated that many Freedom to Speak Up Guardian teams operated effectively, with meetings vital to communication and collaboration. However, insufficient protected time was mentioned as a hindrance to the effectiveness of these network, particularly for those in deputy/associate roles in model three networks.

Freedom to Speak Up Champions/Ambassadors

Several respondents mentioned difficulties around setting up an effective Freedom to Speak Up provision for organisations with complex structures (size, geographical spread etc.). A network of champions/ambassadors is one way of tackling this issue. The terms 'champion' and 'ambassador' are often used interchangeably to describe roles which are designed to raise awareness and promote the speaking up agenda.

Some organisations have a network of Freedom to Speak Up champions or ambassadors¹³ who work alongside guardians to complement the work they do – see figure 21.

Some respondents told us that they were responsible for setting up and supporting their network.

Larger organisations (10,000+ workers) had more Freedom to Speak Up champions/ambassadors.

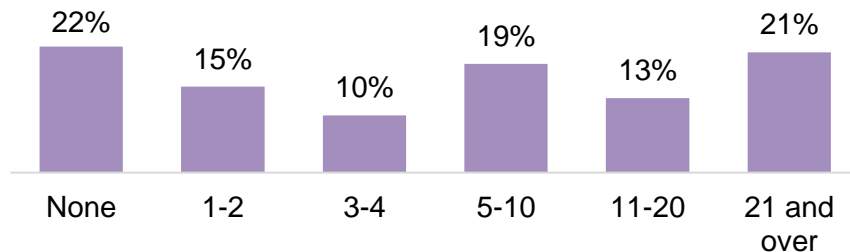


Figure 21: How many Freedom to Speak Up champions / ambassadors does the organisation(s) you support have? (2022/23)

Over a third of respondents (36%) from organisations with a network of Freedom to Speak Up champions/ambassadors said that the reach of this network was satisfactory. Twelve per cent thought that their reach was poor –see figure 22.



Figure 22: How would you rate reach across the organisation achieved through the local Freedom to Speak Up Champion network? (2022/23)

Another benefit of having a network of champions is improved representation of diverse groups. However, 20 per cent of respondents from organisations with champions described the representation of diverse groups amongst the champion network as poor or very poor – see figure 23.



Figure 23: How would you rate representation of diverse groups amongst the local Freedom to Speak Up Champion network? (2022/23)

¹³ [Developing Freedom to Speak Up Champion and Ambassador Networks \(nationalguardian.org.uk\)](https://www.nationalguardian.org.uk)

Support from Leadership: trends and changes in perceptions

Freedom to Speak Up guardians cannot be effective in isolation and must have access to senior leaders and decision-makers in their organisations.

A lack of leadership support can undermine guardians' ability to do their job, including holding leadership to account to address barriers and escalate serious matters effectively. Lack of visible support can diminish the role in the eyes of workers, managers, and sometimes guardians themselves. In extreme cases, we have even heard of guardians feeling victimised for the effective performance of the expected job.

Compared to 2021, a similar proportion of respondents expressed feeling supported by their chief executive (or equivalent) and senior manager team (figure 24).

- The majority of respondents (86%) felt supported by their chief executive,
- Seventy-seven per cent felt supported by their senior management team more generally.

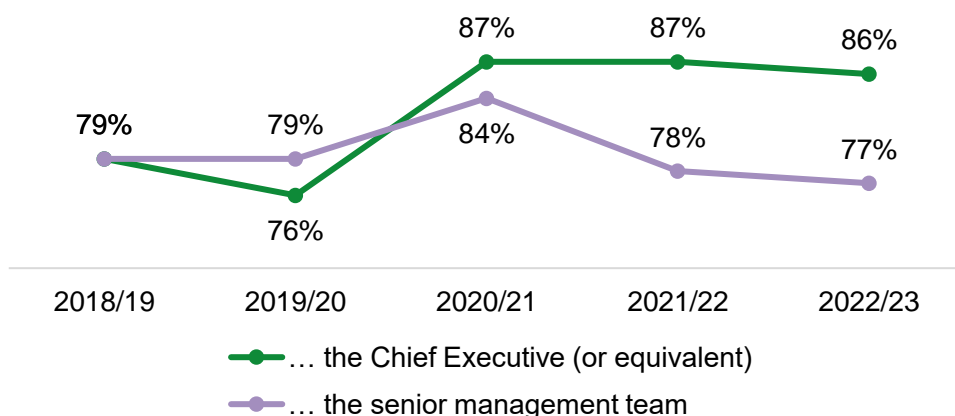


Figure 24. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I am ... - % agreed or strongly agreed

Eighty-one per cent of respondents believed they had access to the support they needed, which indicates a positive increase of four percentage points compared to the results in the previous survey (77%, 2021) – figure 25

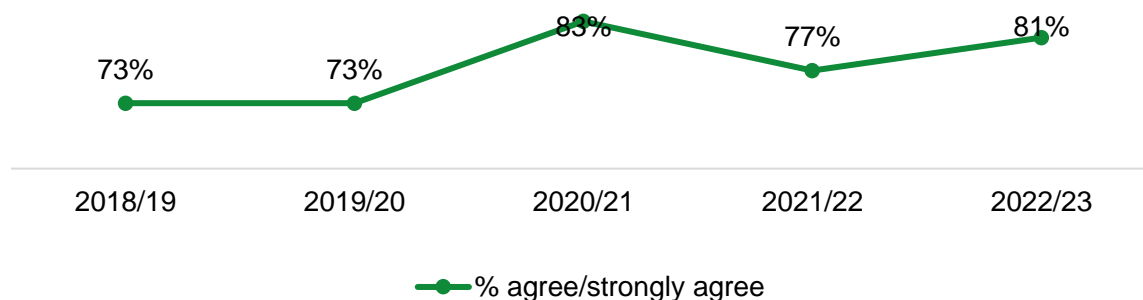


Figure 25. Has access to the support needed

The 2020 survey, conducted during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, showed marked improvements in responses. There was an 11 percentage point increase in respondents who felt supported by their Chief Executive (87% in 2020, 76% in 2019). Since then, the percentage of respondents feeling supported by their Chief Executive has remained consistent. However, there has been a decline of seven percentage points in the number of respondents feeling supported by their senior management team, compared to its peak in 2020 - see figure 26.

It is concerning to note that a quarter of respondents did not agree with the statement: *The senior management team support me*. Likewise, while there has been a slight improvement in this year's results, it remains the case that nearly one in five respondents (19%) did not agree with the statement: *I have access to the support I need*. These findings highlight the need for further attention and improvement in these areas to ensure adequate support for all guardians.

This year's results indicate a marked decline in respondents feeling valued by their managers and senior leaders. Two-thirds (66%) felt valued by managers, showing a decrease of six percentage points compared to the results from the previous survey (72%, 2021). Similarly, just under three-quarters (74%) felt valued by senior leaders, representing a notable decline of 9 percentage points from the previous year (84%, 2021). These findings mark a four-year low in terms of feeling valued by managers and senior leaders (figure 26).

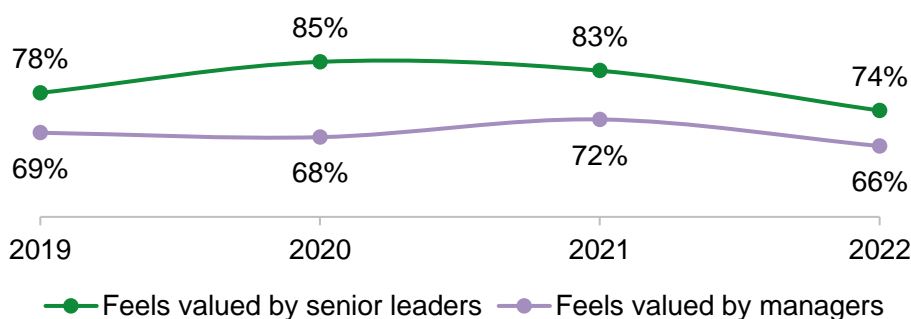


Figure 26. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel valued by... - % agreed (strongly or otherwise)

The lower percentage of respondents feeling valued by managers compared with senior leaders aligns with other findings in this report. There may be specific challenges in supporting speaking up and Freedom to Speak Up guardians among this group of workers, which we touch on earlier in this report (see on page 13).

Access to organisational leadership: perspectives on direct engagement with chief executives, non-executives, and the board

When asked about their access to senior leadership, the majority of respondents said they had sufficient access, although there was a five percentage point decrease in those with access to the board (or equivalent).

- **Chief executives (or equivalent):** 92 per cent of respondents said they had direct access to their chief executive (or equivalent), down a percentage point since the previous survey (93% in 2021, 94% in 2020 and 91% in 2019 and 2018)
- **Non-executive director (or equivalent) who has speaking up as part of their portfolio:** 83 per cent of respondents said they had direct access to the non-executive director (or equivalent), up a percentage point year-on-year.
- **Board (or equivalent):** 78 per cent said they had sufficient access to the board (or equivalent), down five percentage points year-on-year (83%, 2021).

Section 4: Meeting the needs of workers

We asked participants how valued they felt by workers in general, and the individuals they support:

- An overwhelming 96 per cent of respondents felt valued by the individuals they support. This high level of feeling valued has remained consistent over the past four years (94% in 2019, 96% in 2020, 93% in 2021).
- 85 per cent of respondents felt valued by workers in general. A similar percentage of respondents felt the same in previous years (87%, 86% in 2020 and 86% in 2021).

However, in this year's survey, two-thirds (65%) of respondents reported that they were meeting the needs of workers in their organisation. This figure represents a seven percentage point decline (72%, 2021) – see figure 27.

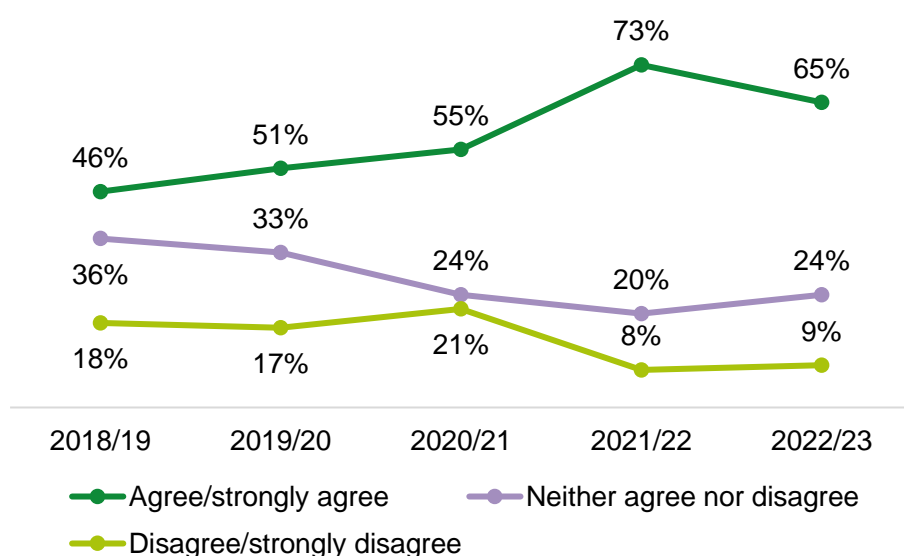


Figure 27. How far do you agree or disagree with the following statement? - I am confident that I am meeting the needs of workers

Protected time

In order to meet the needs of workers, Freedom to Speak Up guardians need protected time which is ring-fenced for their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian duties.

This is an aspect of arrangements that is included in the CQC's well-led inspection guidance. In addition, by the end of January 2024, the senior lead for Freedom to Speak Up in all NHS Trusts should have used the Freedom to Speak Up Reflection and Planning Tool to demonstrate to the senior leadership team, board or any oversight organisation the progress made in developing Freedom to Speak Up

arrangements and includes statements to help reflect on how much time a Guardian has to carry out their role.

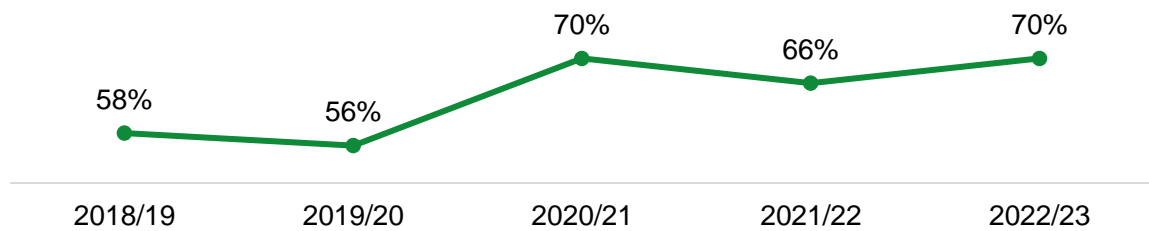


Figure 28: Proportion of Freedom to Speak Up guardians with ring-fenced time – change over time

Seventy per cent of respondents had protected time to fulfil their Freedom to Speak Up guardian role, marking a four percentage point year-on-year increase (66%, 2021) – see figure 28, above.

Over a third (34%) of respondents said they did not have another role. This figure has steadily increased over the years – in 2018, only 12 per cent of respondents did not have another role (figure 29).

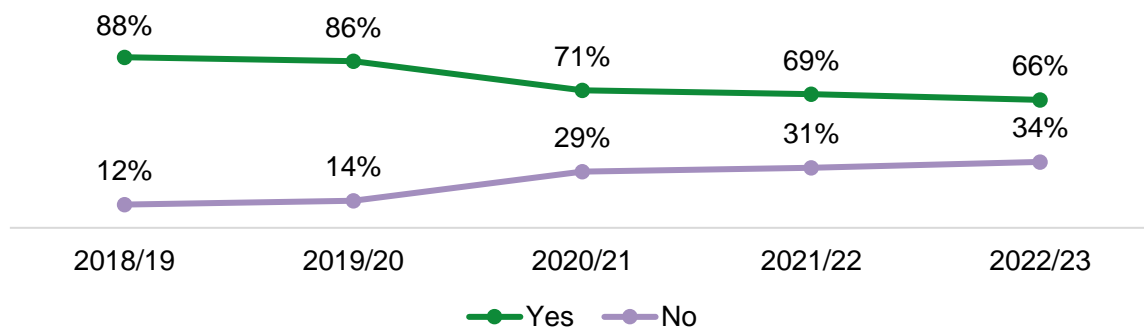


Figure 29: Do you have another role?

Dual roles can work effectively only where there is adequate protected time and resource to carry out the responsibilities of the role.

Amount of protected time

In this year’s survey, we asked about the amount of protected (or ring-fenced) time, if any, allocated to respondents for fulfilling their Freedom to Speak Up role – see figure 30.

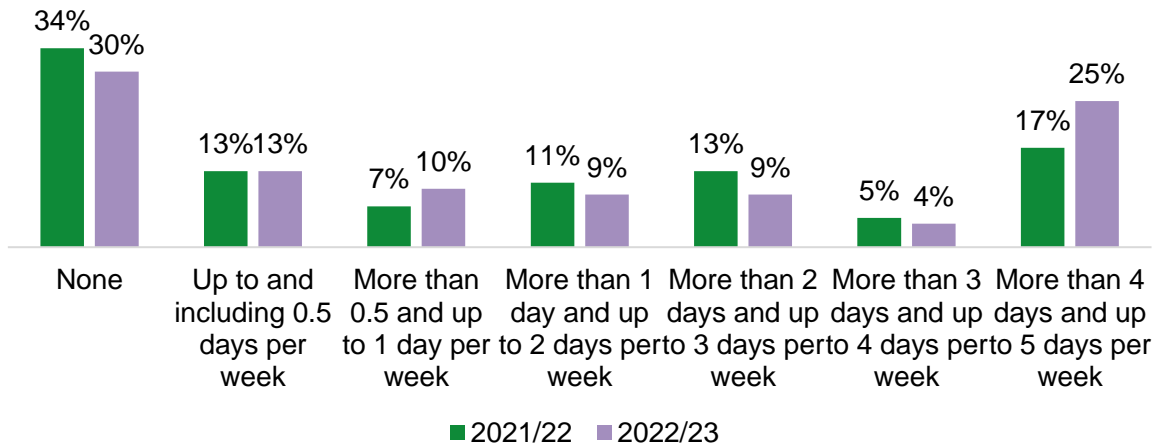


Figure 30: How much ring-fenced time is given to carry out the Freedom to Speak Up role?

Among respondents supporting NHS Trusts, 40 per cent had been allocated more than four days per week. This represents a notable increase of 14 percentage points since the 2021 survey. In comparison, a quarter of all respondents reported having more than four days per week allocated for this purpose.

Breakdown of the results revealed that there was little disparity between organisations with a single Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and those with multiple when it came to whether they had at least some protected time to fulfil their Freedom to Speak Up role.

Thirteen per cent of respondents told us that there had been an increase in their ring-fenced time over the last 12 months.

We asked respondents if they felt they have sufficient time to carry out their Freedom to Speak Up role (figure 31).

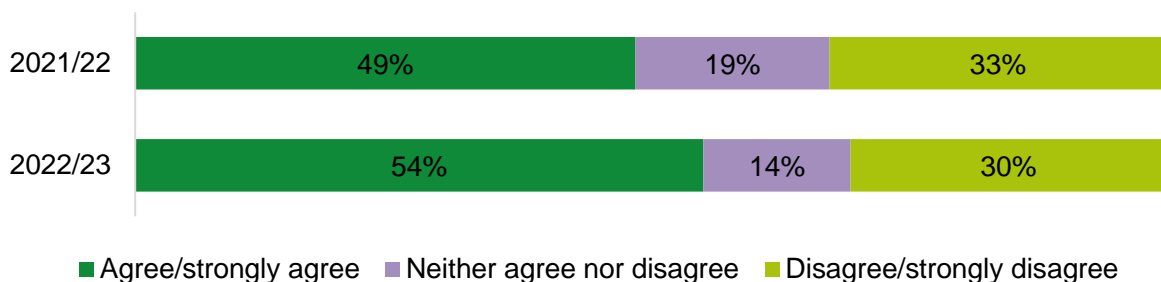


Figure 31: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statement? - I have sufficient time to carry out my Freedom to Speak Up responsibilities

The results indicate that 42 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, representing a five percentage point increase compared to the results of the previous survey. On the other hand, 30 per cent of respondents disagreed with

the statement and 14 per cent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Respondents who disagreed provided various insights on how the lack of time affects their ability to fulfil their role effectively. Common themes included:

- **Time constraints:** *“It is hard to make any significant culture improvements and maintain a visible presence when you are continuously reacting and responding/ following up on cases. It is even harder when your organisation has multiple sites across a wide geographical area. I personally feel that I am spread too thin to make any significant improvements/ changes.”*
- **Impact on workload:** *“Affects wellbeing as own time can be eaten into. The quality and timeliness of the work itself can be affected also. There is much juggling of tasks between responsive and proactive work at all levels of the organisation and collaborative work needed.”*
- **Reactive versus proactive work:** *“As soon as you work on the proactive side of the role - you are left with doing the responsive part of the role in your own personal time. The Freedom to Speak Up guardian job description is a service offer and not a job description that is in any way workable for one individual.”*
- **Work/life balance:** *“Even with increased time allotted, there is always a clash between my clinical role and my Guardian role. I am often staying late to speak with staff rather than being able to conduct during my core hours and feel that I am unable to be very proactive at all. I feel that at times, I spread myself too thinly and the variability makes it hard to plan.”*
- **Lack of resources:** *“When there is less time for proactive work, the reach of our team/service is limited. Working in a large organisation requires sufficient Guardian resource to do this effectively and safely. The expectation of the Guardian role in relation to doing ALL tasks, is not ideal. Guardians could use their time more effectively if Trusts were encouraged to employ Guardian Teams and have capacity for admin support included in this.”*

Balance between reactive and proactive time

We asked how respondents allocated time between the ‘reactive’ and ‘proactive’ aspects of their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role. Reactive aspects of the role include supporting workers who speak up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and proactive aspects include working within their organisation to tackle barriers to speaking up.

The findings revealed that 33 per cent of respondents reported an equal split, with 50

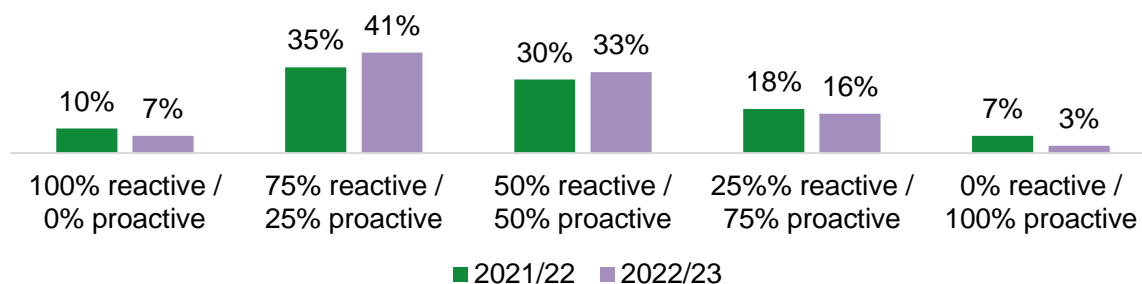


Figure 32. Approximately, what proportion of your time is spent on handling cases brought to you by workers (i.e. the ‘reactive’ part of the role) and what proportion is spent on other Freedom to Speak Up activities (e.g. compiling reports and promoting

per cent of their time dedicated to reactive tasks (such as supporting workers who speak up) and 50 per cent to proactive tasks (such as addressing barriers to speaking up within their organisation). This marks a three-percentage point increase compared to the previous survey’s results (30%, 2021) –see figure 32 above.

Nearly half of the respondents (48%) predominantly spent their time on reactive activities, representing a three percentage point increase from the previous year. Conversely, 19 per cent allocated more time to proactive tasks, indicating a decrease of six percentage points from the prior year.

In addition, we asked whether guardians felt that the proportion of time allocated to reactive and proactive aspects of their role was suitable – see figure 33.

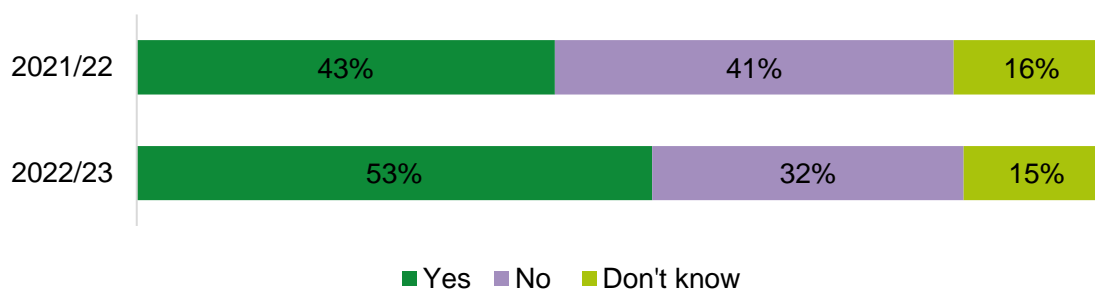


Figure 33. Does this proportion feel right for you?

Just over half of respondents (53%) indicated that the proportion felt right for them. This was a marked increase of 10 percentage points compared to the previous survey results (43%, 2021).

The rationale for the amount of protected time

Forty-two per cent of respondents stated that leaders in their organisations had demonstrated the rationale for the amount of protected time available. Over a quarter (26%) said they had not.

Many respondents mentioned using the National Guardian's Office and NHS England's self-reflection and planning tool¹⁴ in order to determine the amount of protected time. Feedback from Freedom to Speak Up guardians was also mentioned, in conjunction with open and supportive discussions and negotiations with managers, senior leaders and/or the board. Reports from regulators of insufficient resources for Freedom to Speak Up guardians and the results from internal and external audits also led to an increase in time.

Data used to support the rationale for the amount of time included staff survey results and analysis of speaking up cases raised with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian(s). This included the number and complexity of cases and number of cases where detriment was indicated.

Approaches to increase time for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role

Having undertaken the rationale exercise to determine the amount of time needed, approaches to increase the amount of time for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian service included:

- Appointing additional guardians or increasing the working hours of existing guardians.
- Flexibility in working arrangements, such as compressed hours to accommodate individual preferences and those with dual roles.

In some organisations, part-time or deputy/associate guardians were appointed to ensure coverage throughout the working week.

Feedback from respondents in smaller organisations emphasised the significance of recognising the unique characteristics of each organisation and the need for a customised approach when allocating protected time to guardians:

"We are a very small organisation who have an open-door policy for their staff. I have two days a month ring fenced time which has proven over the last two years to be more than enough for me to carry out my... duties."

Some respondents highlighted systemic challenges, such as staffing shortages, that impacted an organisation's ability to allocate dedicated time for the role.

"Unfortunately, with shortage of staffing at the moment, it is impossible to get time ring-fenced. So, this role, at present - until things improve - will be done in my own time. This, hopefully, will change this year and I will get ring-fenced time."

¹⁴ [Freedom to Speak Up: A reflection and planning tool](#)

The impact of insufficient protected time

The 30 per cent of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, *'I am confident that I am meeting the needs of workers'*, described several ways that this impacts how effectively they can carry out their role. In some instances, Freedom to Speak Up guardians said that they did not have enough time to carry out the reactive side of the role.

"I have had to stop taking cases due to a heavy caseload, of complex cases which are not moving very quickly towards resolution despite a considerable effort from me to push these with the relevant areas of the organisation."

However, the main impact described was a lack of time to carry out 'proactive' work, such as visiting teams across the organisation, attending inductions, creating promotional materials, sharing learning and improvements.

"It is impossible to be proactive as constantly fighting fires and managing cases."

The Freedom to Speak Up guardian role is varied and requires a unique range of skills. Some respondents told us that the expectations on Freedom to Speak Up guardians are unrealistic and require skills outside the scope of the job description competencies.

There are also 'business as usual' tasks which guardians struggle to complete within their protected time (if any) such as general administration, data reporting and board reporting. Several respondents also said that they were involved in additional projects due to their role as a Freedom to Speak Up guardian, which adds to their workload and time commitments.

Comparing results from those with and without protected (ring-fenced) time

The table below provides a breakdown of protected (or ring-fenced) time results. To ensure a more meaningful comparison, the results only include respondents who are the sole guardian in their respective organisations – please see figure 34, below.

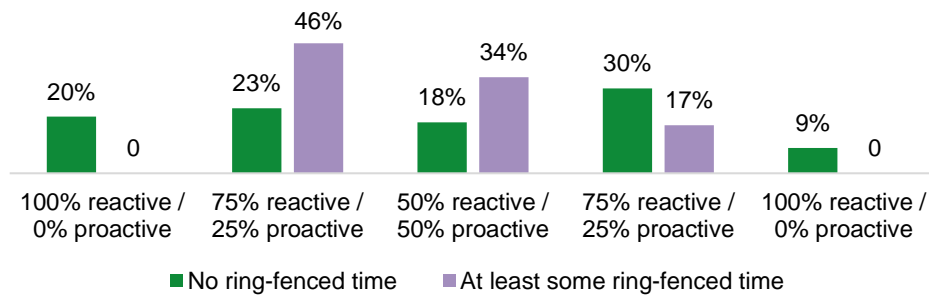


Figure 34. Approximately, what proportion of your time is spent on handling cases brought to you by workers and what proportion is spent on other Freedom to Speak Up

We have also provided a breakdown of responses to statements by respondents without ring-fenced time and those with at least some ring-fenced time. As above, to ensure a more meaningful comparison, the results only include respondents who are the sole guardian in their respective organisations – please see figure 35, below. The results highlight those respondents with at least some protected time have more of a balance between the reactive and proactive aspects of their role:

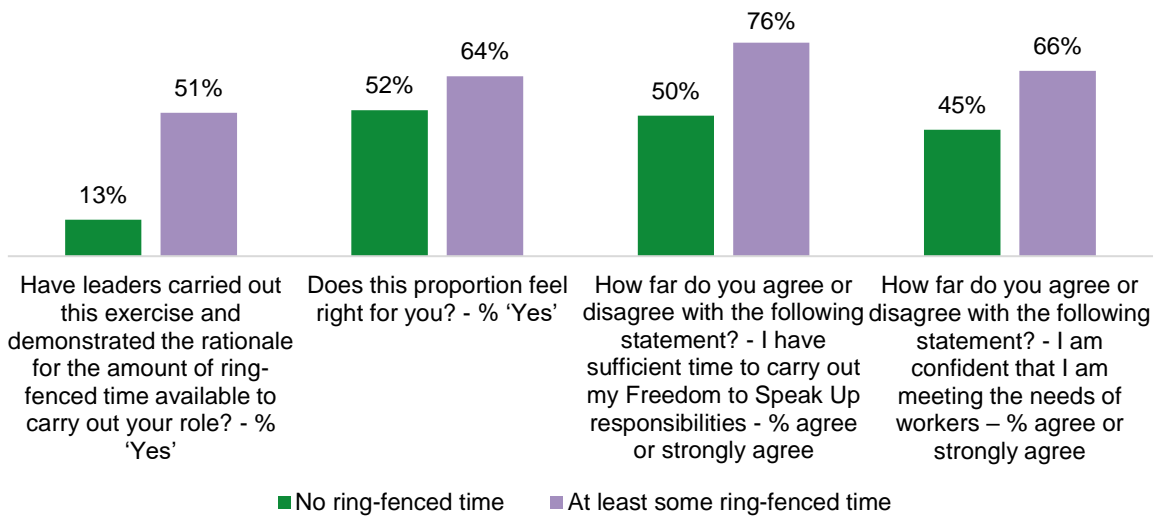


Figure 35. % of respondents answering 'yes' or 'agree/strongly agree' to the statements (2022/23)

- Among respondents with protected time, only 3 per cent reported focusing solely on either reactive or proactive elements of the role, whereas this percentage rose to 29 per cent for those without protected time.
- Over three-quarters (76%) of respondents with protected time agreed they had sufficient time to fulfil their Freedom to Speak Up responsibilities. In comparison, half (50%) of those without protected time said the same.
- Respondents with at least some ring-fenced time demonstrated a higher level of confidence in meeting the needs of workers. Almost two-thirds (66%) of

respondents with protected time agreed with this statement, while the agreement rate dropped to 45 per cent among those without.

Protected time and zero and nil data submissions

Freedom to Speak Up guardians are expected, on a quarterly basis, to submit anonymised data about the cases they have received to the National Guardian's Office:

- Respondents working for organisations that reported zero cases in the four quarters leading up to the survey had much less protected time compared to those working for organisations with at least one reported case during the same period.¹⁵ In the former group, no guardians had more than one day per week of dedicated time –see figure 36, below.¹⁶
- Even less protected or dedicated time was allocated to Freedom to Speak Up guardians from organisations that did not provide any data, including zero cases, to the NGO during the same period.

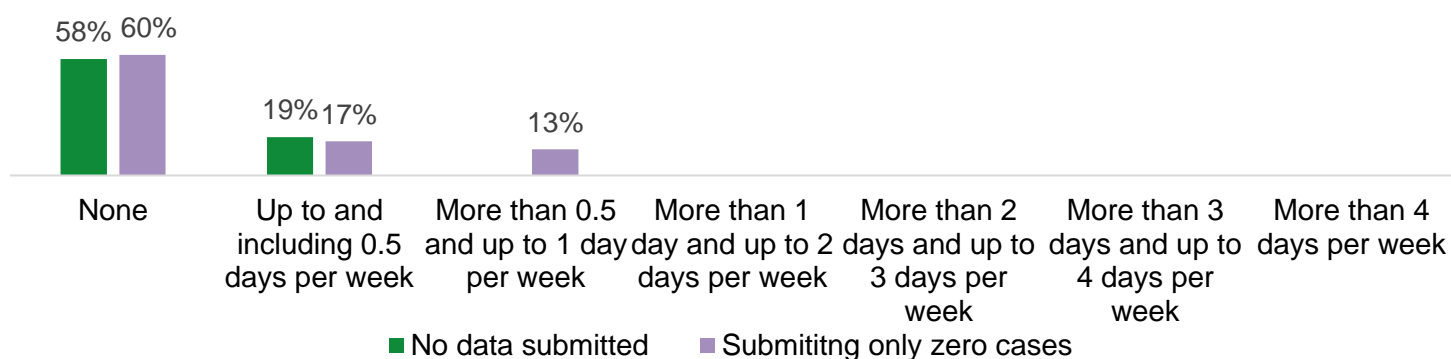


Figure 366: Ring-fenced time for guardians from organisations that submitted zero cases and organisations that did not submit data to the National Guardian's Office

Other resources

Freedom to Speak Up guardians must have access to the necessary resources to fulfil their role effectively.

We asked about respondents' access to resources, such as a budget for expenses and room availability for private meetings – see figure 37.

For each resource we inquired about, a majority of respondents indicated having

¹⁵ Even if no cases were received during the reporting period, Freedom to Speak Up guardians are still required to report this as zero, in compliance with the NGO guidance.

¹⁶ As part of the survey process, we shared certain participant information with the organisation responsible for conducting the survey. This information encompassed details such as names and contact information as well as compliance with data collection requests and, where applicable, regulatory ratings and national staff survey results. This meant we were able to carry out filtered analysis of the survey results based on these breakdowns - allowing for a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the collected data - while upholding the anonymity of the survey participants.

access to it. However, the proportions of these majorities varied. Compared to the results of the previous survey, there was an increase in the percentage of respondents who indicated having access to these resources.

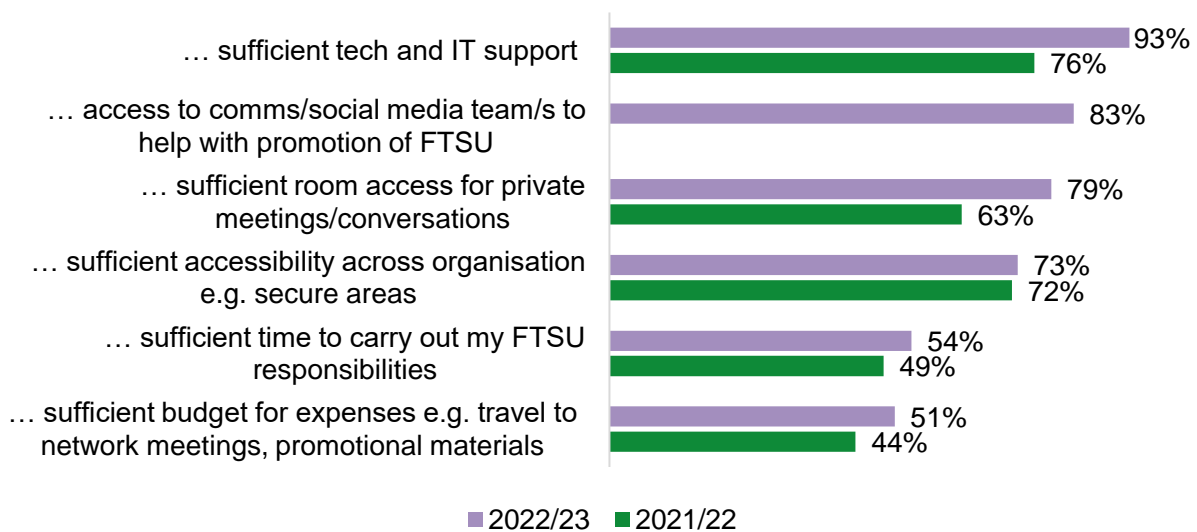


Figure 377: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statement? - I have... (% that agreed or strongly agreed)

For the first time, we also asked respondents whether they had access to communications and social media teams to assist in promoting Freedom to Speak Up. Eighty-three per cent (83%) of respondents said they had such access – while three per cent disagreed, indicating a relatively positive level of support in this area. However, for budget allocation for expenses, the results were less favourable. Just over a half of respondents (51%) indicated having sufficient budget, while 26 per cent did not.

We asked participants about why they identified these insufficient resources as problematic. Based on the responses, we have identified several key themes, including:

1. **Lack of budget:** Many respondents expressed concerns that this limited their ability to pay for promotional materials, training, events, and other essential resources. The absence of a dedicated budget hindered their capacity to deliver innovative and creative work and restricted their ability to promote their roles effectively.

"During Freedom to Speak Up Month, I tried to promote Freedom to Speak Up as much as I could but... end up buying lots of things out of my own money..."

2. **Administrative support:** Several respondents mentioned the need for administrative support to handle tasks such as diary management, room bookings, event coordination, and report analysis. The absence of this support resulted in time-consuming administrative tasks, limiting their capacity

to engage in their primary responsibilities and strategic activities.

"Admin support... in setting up meeting and following/chasing and liaise and setting up events and forums... this would give guardians time and head space to focus on the role and concerns (not feeling rushed and be able to be in the room and listen to the person) but also look at the bigger picture around themes/trends and the wider culture."

3. **Communications and publicity:** Many respondents expressed frustration with the lack of communication support and limited access to promotional materials. This meant they could not effectively promote Freedom to Speak Up and reach out to workers. Delays and limited support from their communications teams were also mentioned as challenges.
4. **Lack of private space:** The absence of private and confidential spaces to support workers was also mentioned as a problem by many respondents. Difficulties in finding suitable locations for sensitive conversations had a negative impact on their ability to offer a safe space for workers and provide timely support.
"Room and space availability for private and confidential discussions. This results in discussions being undertaken off site."
5. **IT and Technological Support:** Several respondents highlighted the lack of robust and secure digital systems for capturing caseload information and providing confidential channels for workers. The absence of adequate IT and technological support hindered their ability to handle and address concerns effectively and may potentially impact on confidentiality.
"Obtaining access to bits of data for the purpose of triangulation has likewise been hard to get due to the various platforms used, capacity of teams, silo working and access issues."
6. **Travel Expenses:** Some respondents mentioned the challenge of obtaining travel expenses reimbursement in a timely manner. The need to pay for travel, parking, and other related expenses upfront and wait for reimbursement placed financial pressure on them and affected their ability to allocate resources effectively.

Absence cover

Fifty-nine per cent of respondents said that their organisation had arrangements for absence cover (planned or unplanned) in order to ensure a continuous level of support for workers. Consideration was given to upholding confidentiality and NGO expectations when arranging cover for absences (see box below).

Set arrangements were more commonly reported, indicating established procedures for absence cover. But ad hoc arrangements were mentioned in some organisations, implying a more improvised approach to covering absences. Cover arrangements primarily focused on addressing the reactive aspects of the guardian role and

supporting workers in the absence of the guardian. Limited mention was made of covering the proactive elements.

The absence of cover arrangements could lead to increased workloads and challenges upon the Guardian's return, impacting their wellbeing. Workers were directed to policy documents, intranet resources, or other internal channels for reporting concerns during the Guardian's absence.

The type of cover varied:

- **Arrangements between/among guardians:** Many respondents were part of a team of two or more guardians, working together to provide coverage during leave periods. Guardians often alternated leave and provided support for each other within their team.
- **Arrangements with other colleagues:** Contingency arrangements involved collaboration with Freedom to Speak Up champions/ambassadors, executive and non-executive leads for speaking up, or other designated contacts. These colleagues were identified as alternative points of contact during the absence of the Guardian.

Cross-organisational support/integration: Collaboration and cross-cover arrangements existed with some neighbouring organisations/those within the same integrated care system.

Guidance for Starting Out and Stepping Down

The National Guardian's Office has issued guidance for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians¹⁷ on their roles, transitions, and responsibilities. The guidance covers the process of starting in the role, dealing with absences, and stepping down.

It clarifies how case data and ongoing cases are handled when a Guardian takes extended leave or transitions out of the role. The document also offers instructions for planned changes in Guardianship and how to handle unforeseen absences to maintain trust, worker support, and confidentiality.

Recommendations

Freedom to Speak Up guardians play a crucial role in providing an alternative channel for workers to voice their suggestions, concerns or any other matter. They also work in partnership throughout the organisation to foster an environment that normalises speaking up as an integral part of everyday work. They need adequate resources and support from the organisation in order to fulfil these responsibilities effectively.

The National Guardian's Office has consistently emphasised the need for such resources and organisational support. These matters are explored in the [Freedom to](#)

¹⁷ <https://nationalguardian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-Starting-out-Stepping-Down-Guidance.pdf>

[speak up guidance and a Freedom to speak up reflection and planning tool](#) we developed with NHS England and considered by the Care Quality Commission as part of their regulatory and inspection work.

Yet, our data reveals that many guardians report a lack of organisational support and limited access to necessary resources.

We recommend that senior leaders discuss these findings with their Freedom to Speak Up guardian(s). These discussions should encompass an evaluation of resources, including protected time, provided to the role. Leaders should consider various relevant factors outlined in the Freedom to Speak Up guidance from the National Guardian's Office and NHS England.¹⁸

The National Guardian's Office recommends that NHS England and the Care Quality Commission review their regulatory and supervisory processes to ensure they identify and address cases where organisations fail to implement and sustain the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role in line with our guidance.

¹⁸https://nationalguardian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/B1245_ij_NHS-FTSU-Guide-eBook.pdf

Section 5: Wellbeing and support

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.

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.

Despite the stressful aspects of the role, nearly eight out of ten (78%) respondents expressed their likelihood, to recommend the Freedom to Speak Up guardian role to a friend or colleague. Conversely, 15 per cent of respondents indicated their unlikelihood to recommend the role – see figure 38.

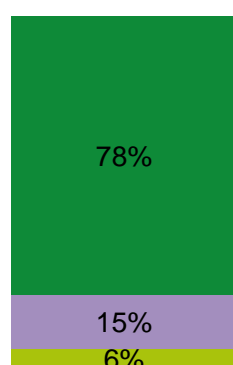


Figure 38: If a friend or colleague was seeking out a new role, how likely would you be to recommend a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role to them? (2022/23)

- Likely to recommend (slightly, very)
- Unlikely to recommend (slightly, very)
- Don't know

Respondents shared their views on the impact of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role on their health and wellbeing - see figure 39.

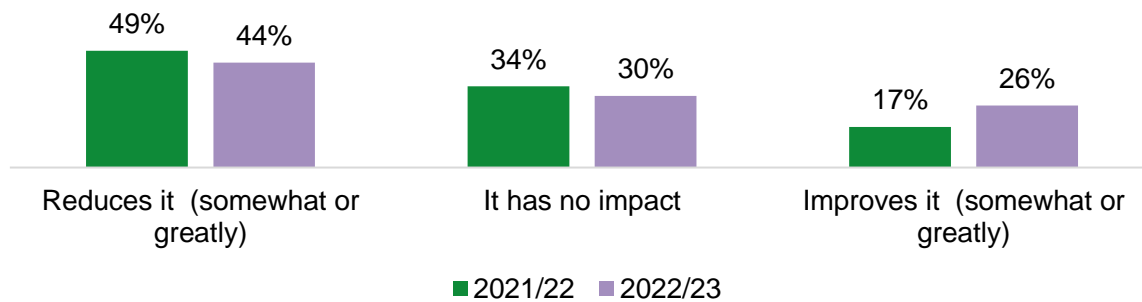


Figure 39: How do you feel your role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian impacts on your emotional and psychological well-being?

Forty-four per cent (44%) of respondents stated that the role had reduced their health and wellbeing, either somewhat or greatly. This figure represents a decrease of five percentage points compared to the results of the previous survey, where the figure stood at 49 per cent.

A notable finding was that 26 per cent of the respondents reported an improvement in their health and wellbeing due to the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role. This represents a notable increase of nine percentage points from the previous results (17%, 2021).

Three in ten respondents (30%) reported that the role had no impact on their health and wellbeing.

We asked respondents to elaborate on their answers. Overall, the messages express a mix of positive and negative experiences, emphasising the emotional toll the role can take, the importance of support, and the satisfaction of helping others.

We have grouped the key points that emerged from respondents' answers thematically:

1. Emotional impact: Hearing about workers' concerns and negative experiences can be emotionally draining and the role can be stressful and overwhelming at times. Dealing with distressing cases, such as suicide or abuse, affects mental health. The role can be lonely and isolating, with limited support from managers. Continuous exposure to difficult situations meant some felt vulnerable and that the role had had a negative impact on their wellbeing. The role may affect confidence or trigger personal circumstances.

2. Rewarding aspects: Guardians expressed feeling privileged to be in the role, and being able to help others and make a difference for workers. Positive feedback and knowing that workers feel supported and listened to is rewarding, especially when cases are successfully resolved. They enjoyed the variety and autonomy the role offers and being part of the network.

3. Challenges and frustrations: Some felt limited in the ability to effect change or address concerns due to organisational resistance. There was frustration with HR/people policies and slow resolution of concerns. There was mention that some people who spoke up had unrealistic expectations of immediate resolution. Inadequate support from the organisation left them feeling vulnerable in the role. Speaking truth to power and differences of opinion with leadership or managers was a challenge.

4. Support and wellbeing: Guardian shared how used self-care practices to prevent burnout, with a good support network and hobbies outside of work. Some felt valued and supported by their managers, with regular supervision and access to professional support (such as clinical psychologists). They appreciated the autonomy in managing one's schedule and participating in learning events.

We asked respondents whether their employer offered them health and wellbeing support (such as access to occupational health or other emotional and psychological support services):

- 89 per cent reported that support was available to them
- Out of this group, 23 per cent had actually used this support
- Of those who accessed the support, 76 per cent indicated that they found it helpful.

Regional and national 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. Over half (58%) reported attending three or more regional or national Freedom to Speak Up guardian network meetings in the past 12 months, representing a notable increase of seven percentage points compared to the results from our previous survey (51%, 2021) – see figure 40.

Twenty-nine percent (29%) of respondents had attended one or two such meetings during the same period. Similar to the previous survey's findings, 13 per cent stated

that they had not attended any regional or national Freedom to Speak Up network meetings in the past 12 months.

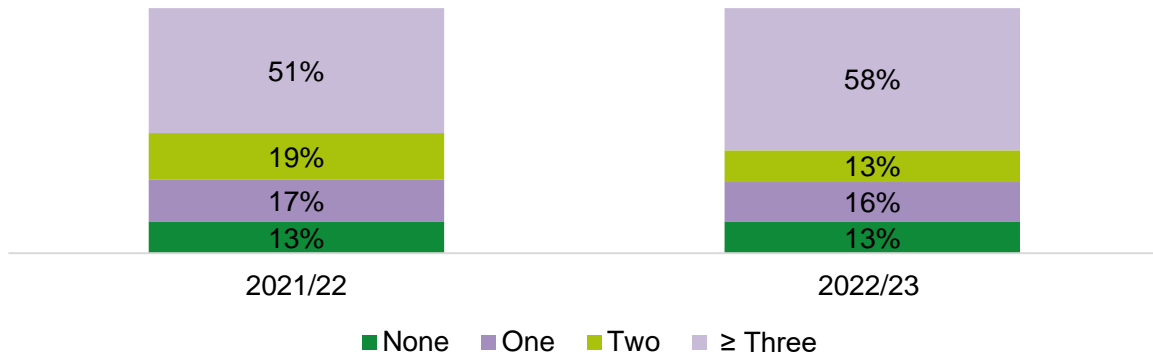


Figure 40: In the last 12 months, how many national and regional Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network meetings have you attended?

Common themes we identified among respondents' feedback were::

- Importance of support from within the organisation, including senior leaders and former guardians, to attend meetings
- Value of attending regional and national network meetings, as they provided opportunities for communication, collaboration, and sharing of good practices.

Following responses to the previous Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey, we are working in collaboration with the networks and their network chairs to ensure that networks meet the needs of all Freedom to Speak Up guardians. This includes clear network chair role expectations and fair and open recruitment of new network chairs and regular check-ins with network chairs. Post-meeting surveys of network members are now in place and feedback from the surveys will be used to monitor effectiveness of the networks.

Section 6: About the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Network

Freedom to Speak Up guardians represent different professions, roles, levels of seniority and experience.

Length of time in role

In this year's survey, there was an increase in the percentage of respondents who had been in the guardian role for three or more years, with 36 per cent of participants falling into this category compared to 32 per cent in the previous survey.

Twenty-two percent of respondents had been serving as guardians for more than four years.¹⁹ On the other hand, 28 per cent of the respondents were still in their first year as a guardian.

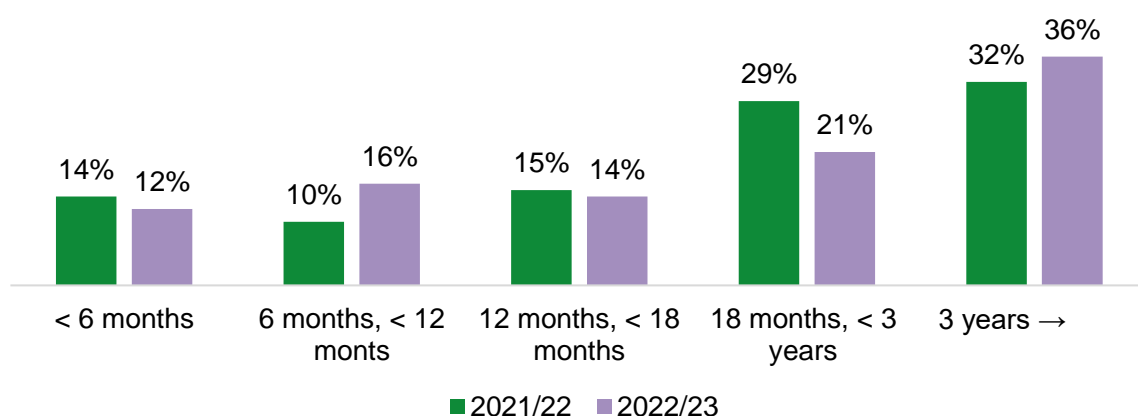


Figure 381: How long have you been in role?

Occupational group

Almost a fifth of respondents (19%) classified their role as sitting in the Central Functions / Corporate Services occupational group – see figure 42.

Contractual arrangements

Most respondents said that they were on permanent contracts (84%). There are also a small number of guardians who are employed by external suppliers, are bank workers or who carry out the role on a voluntary basis.

¹⁹ Unlike previous years, our latest survey introduced a new response option, allowing participants to select 'four years or more' when indicating their tenure in the guardian role. Due to this change, the corresponding data for this category is not included in figure 41, as it cannot be compared directly to the previous year's survey.

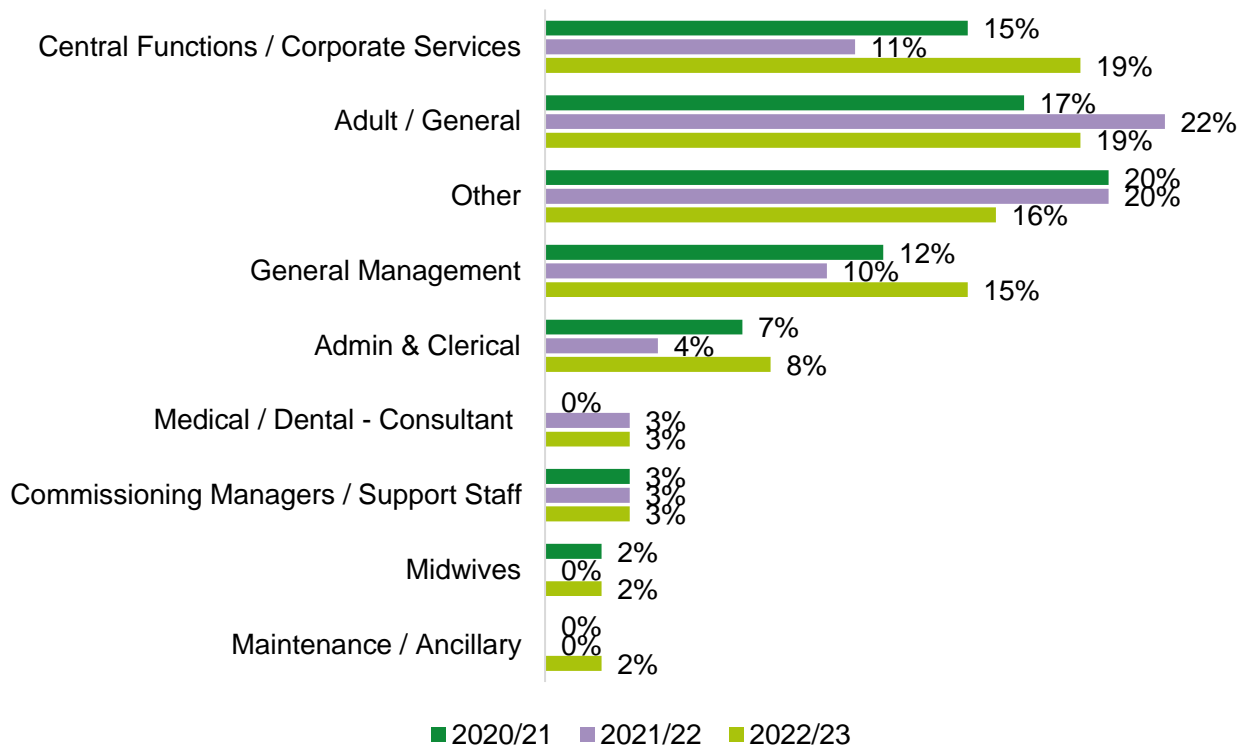


Figure 42: What is your occupational group?

Banding, grading and seniority

Sixty-three per cent of respondents were on the Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scale, which is the current NHS grading and pay system for NHS staff, except for doctors, dentists, apprentices and some senior managers.

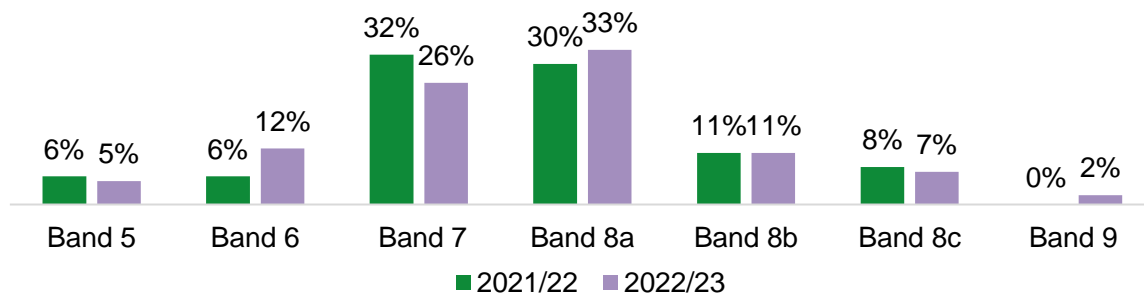


Figure 393: Agenda for Change banding

A notable change in the banding for respondents on Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scales was observed compared to the results in the previous survey. In 2021, the most common band for respondents was band 7, accounting for 32 per cent of respondents. However, in our most recent survey, the most popular band shifted to band 8a, with 33 per cent of respondents falling into this category – see figure 43.

There has been a seven percentage point decline in the proportion of respondents identifying themselves as 'very senior management' among those who are not on the Agenda for Change (AfC) banding (figure 44).

A number of respondents asked for standardised banding, clearer recruitment processes, and consistent monitoring to address issues of inconsistency and ensure fair treatment and effectiveness across the guardian role:

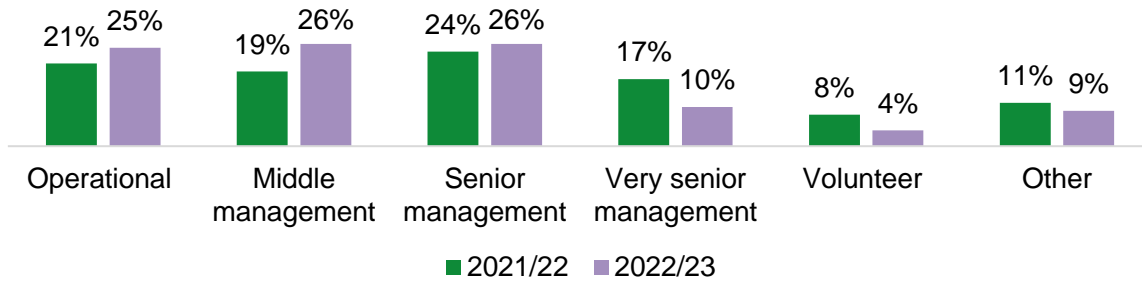


Figure 44: Non-Agenda for Change

Protected characteristics

Many Freedom to Speak Up guardians, including many of those that participated in our survey, support organisations other than NHS Trusts. Therefore, it is not possible to compare directly the collective demographics of participants to the NHS workforce. Nonetheless, in this section, we refer to figures on the composition of the NHS workforce to provide relative context on the representation of participants as a collective.

Gender

Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) identified as female, down three percentage points since the previous survey. Over a fifth of respondents (21%) identified as men – see figure 45.

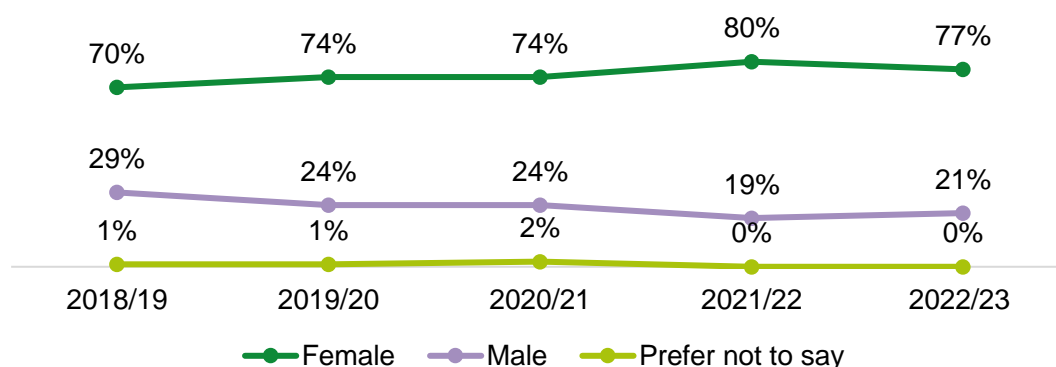


Figure 405: What of the following best describes you?

The NHS workforce is composed of 75 per cent female employees.²⁰ The gender representation within the guardian network, as reflected by the respondents in our survey, aligns with the broader workforce demographics.

The percentage of respondents identifying as female has shown a notable increase of seven percentage points since 2018 when it stood at 70 per cent. There has been a corresponding decrease in the percentage of respondents identifying as men, declining by eight percentage points since 2018.

Ethnic group or background

Eighty-five per cent of respondents identified as White in terms of their ethnic group or background.²¹ Fifteen per cent were from other/minority ethnic backgrounds – see figure 46.

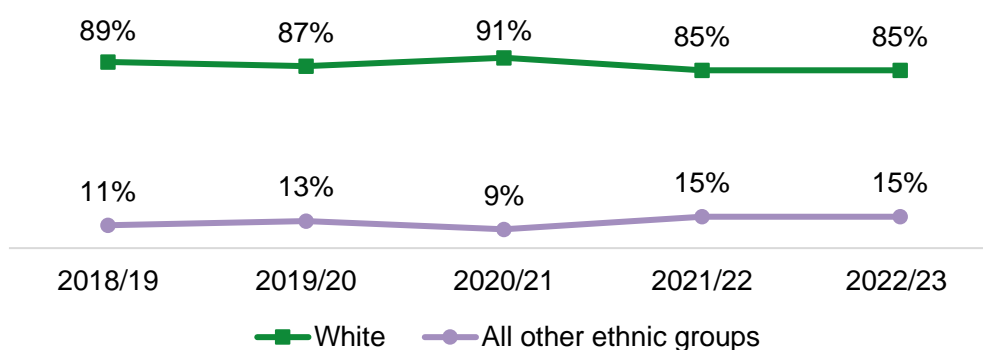


Figure 46: What is your ethnic group?

In comparison, 74 per cent of the NHS workforce identified as White.²²

Since 2018, there has been a five percentage point increase in respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds, up from 10 per cent in 2018 to 15 per cent in 2023.

²⁰ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/03/nhs-celebrates-the-vital-role-hundreds-of-thousands-of-women-have-played-in-the-pandemic/>

²¹ This encompasses the following subcategories: English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller and Any other White background.

²² [NHS workforce - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.service.gov.uk/ethnicity-facts-figures) (April 2023)

Age

Just over half of participants (53%) were aged between and including 51 and 65 years – see figure 47. There has been a notable shift in the age demographics of respondents over the past five years:

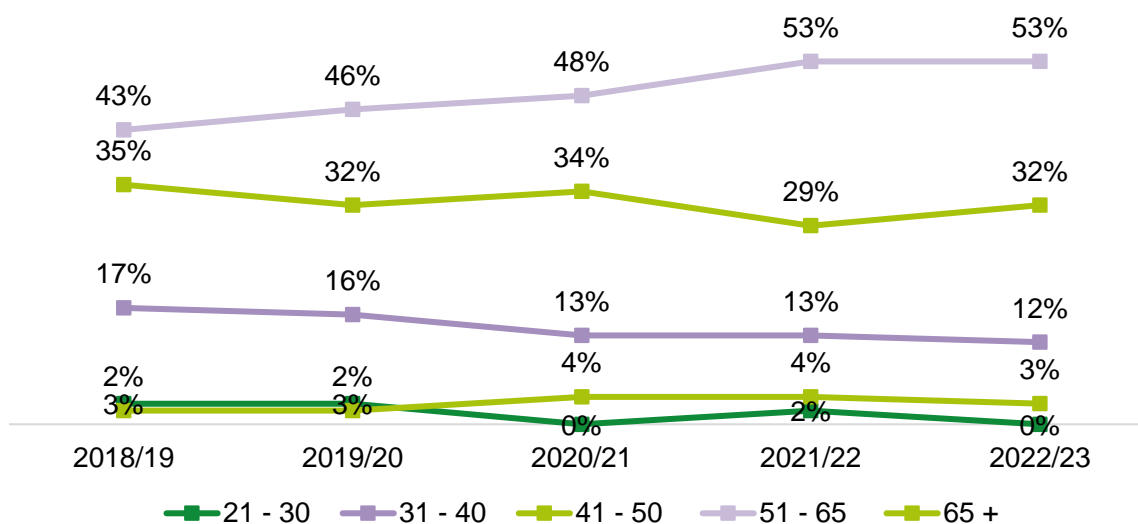


Figure 47: What is your age?

- In 2018, 43 per cent of respondents indicated that they fell within the 51 to 65 age range, representing a ten-percentage point increase compared to the current survey result (53%).
- The percentage of respondents aged between 21 and 40 has witnessed a decline over the same period. In 2018, this age group constituted 20 per cent of the respondents, which decreased to 12 per cent in the 2023 survey, reflecting an eight percentage point decrease.

Please see the reference sheet for a breakdown of respondents by other characteristics.²³

Recommendations

Our findings indicate that in some respects, like ethnicity, the network is not necessarily representative of the wider workforce it serves. In 2018, 89 per cent of respondents identified as White, which stood at 85 per cent in 2023. In comparison, and though not directly comparable, among NHS staff whose ethnicity was known, 74 per cent were White.

There are likely several reasons contributing to this disparity. For example, appointments to the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role are not always made through fair recruitment processes. Research has identified the so-called "snowy white peaks" of the NHS - that the workforce gets whiter as it becomes more senior - and we are aware of a shift upwards among respondents in terms of their

²³ Reference sheets available at <https://nationalguardian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/20230629-Reference-sheet.docx>

banding/seniority.²⁴ Likewise, the results suggest that the network may be getting older, and White colleagues are more prominent in older cohorts.

Also, some groups, such as ethnic minorities, face specific barriers to speaking up. It is reasonable to assume that people within such a group might also feel that the Freedom to Speak Up guardian role is itself not a career option available to them.

We commissioned research in 2021²⁵ which indicated that workers are more likely to feel confident to speak up to someone they believe will better understand their concerns and respond to them appropriately (for example, a worker experiencing racism at work). A Freedom to Speak Up Guardian - or anyone else for that matter - cannot be that person for all workers regarding every potential issue they may wish to raise. To address these concerns, two key actions must be prioritised:

1. Those responsible for responding to workers speaking up must receive effective training to listen with curiosity, empathy and be conscious of barriers to speaking up and their impact on marginalised groups.
2. Workers should have a variety of routes available for them to voice their concerns. Offering multiple avenues increases the likelihood of workers finding a suitable channel for them to speak up to.

It is essential to address the systemic discrimination and discriminatory hiring practices that may discourage people from applying or even considering the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role. People's protected characteristics, including ethnicity, should not be a barrier to becoming a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. Leaders must ensure a fair and open recruitment processes to support this.

²⁴Kline, R (2014) [The "snowy white peaks" of the NHS](#)
The 2022 WRES data indicates that this is still the case <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/nhs-workforce-race-equality-standard-wres2022-data-analysis-report-for-nhs-trusts/#wres-indicator-1>

²⁵ [Difference Matters.pdf \(nationalguardian.org.uk\)](#)

Section 7: Conclusion and Next Steps

Freedom to Speak Up guardians serve as a vital additional channel for workers to express their concerns and work with others to enhance the speaking up culture within their organisations. However, the effectiveness of this role is contingent upon its implementation and support. The Guardian function is just one aspect of the broader Freedom to Speak Up arrangements within each organisation, and just one part of a wider strategy for improving Speak Up culture and psychological safety.

Consistency of implementation of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role

Our findings demonstrate that an increasing percentage of respondents have protected time, indicating that the guardian role is becoming increasingly valued within many organisations. Nonetheless, the results also highlight that the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role, along with Freedom to Speak Up arrangements in general, is not always implemented in line with expectations and good practice. Together with the NHS Staff Survey's identification of a deterioration in the confidence to speak up by healthcare workers, this underscores the need for healthcare leaders and regulators to take meaningful action in response to these findings.

A significant gap remains within the speaking up arrangements across healthcare. Many organisations still do not have a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian registered with and trained by the National Guardian's Office.

Training for Freedom to Speak Up guardians

This report has highlighted the complexity of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

Freedom to Speak Up guardians are required to complete the National Guardian's Office training in order to be placed on the National Guardian's Office's directory. The training is in two parts:

1. Foundation eLearning
2. A reflective conversation with a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian mentor

Successful completion of the Foundation e-learning module allows the Guardian to register on the National Guardian's Office Directory and enables access to Guardian networks and important communications. Within three months of completion of the module, Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are expected to have had a reflective

conversation with a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian mentor. Those that have not may be removed from the NGO's Directory.

Some Freedom to Speak Up guardians had completed their Foundation training many years ago, and others had become guardians during the pandemic. To give the National Guardian's Office assurance that all guardians were trained to the same level of knowledge and understanding of the expectations of this unique and far-reaching role, in 2021/22 all Freedom to Speak Up guardians were asked to complete the newly devised Foundation eLearning modules. This served as Refresher Training for that year.

Annual Refresher training is now mandatory. From 2022/23, if guardians do not complete their annual refresher training by 30 November each year, they will be contacted to ensure they have the support they need to complete the eLearning. If following this support offer they still fail to meet this requirement, the National Guardian's Office will notify CQC and NHSE so that they are informed of the relevant organisation's non-compliance with our guidance.²⁶ The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian's details may also be removed from the NGO's Find My Guardian page, because we cannot be assured that they have the necessary training to carry out this important role.

Next steps

We will share our findings and recommendations with key stakeholders, including NHSE, CQC, and others, to inform their work in improving the speaking up culture and arrangements within healthcare organisations.

We will use the findings of this survey to inform our ongoing work supporting Freedom to Speak Up guardians and their organisations to make speaking up business as usual.

²⁶ This applies to organisations that come within CQC and/or NHS England's remits.