



Press release

13 July 2023

Sharp decline in Freedom to Speak Up guardians' perception of the improvements in the Speak Up culture of the healthcare sector

More work being done to take action on barriers to speaking up, but system pressures adding to feeling that speaking up is futile

A report published by the National Guardian's Office today (13 July) outlines the experience of Freedom to Speak Up guardians and how speaking up arrangements are being implemented in the healthcare sector.

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

The National Guardian's Office surveys Freedom to Speak Up guardians in order to understand how speaking up is supported within healthcare organisations. Their views give valuable insights into both how the Guardian role is implemented and what further support and learning is needed to make speaking up business as usual.

It is positive to note that eighty-four per cent (84%) of respondents said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers to speaking up, a nine-percentage point increase compared the previous survey, and three-quarters of respondents said retaliation as a result of speaking up was not tolerated.

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 8-percentage point increase compared to previous responses (58% 2021), and puts feelings of futility on a par with the fear of detriment as the main barrier to speaking up identified by Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

As one Freedom to Speak Up 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."*

Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark, National Guardian for the NHS, said: *"As the National Guardian for the NHS, I too am raising my voice alongside Freedom to Speak Up guardians to call for urgent action to be taken to focus on the wellbeing of the workforce."*

“It takes time to build trust. These results show that nurturing a Speak Up culture is a long-game.

“This survey 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. It is only by us all making this our own personal responsibility, that we can make speaking up business as usual.”

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

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Notes for editors:

About the Survey

Listening to Guardians: Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2023

Published : 13 July 2023

Available from: www.nationalguardian.org.uk/

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

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

We invited 950 Freedom to Speak Up guardians to participate in the survey, which was open from 12 January to 9 February 2023. Almost forty percent (or 368) of those invited took part in the survey.

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2023 Question List is 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.

Key findings:

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

- Forty-five per cent (45%) 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 marked change 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 (59%) of respondents said the speaking up culture in their organisation specifically had improved over the last 12 months. In comparison, three quarters of respondents in the previous survey said the culture in their organisation had improved in the preceding 12 months.
- Sixty-six per cent (66%) of respondents said their organisation had a positive culture of speaking up, up three-percentage points compared to 2021.
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) said that senior leaders supported workers to speak up, a 3-percentage point decrease compared to the previous survey (71%, 2021).
- Over half of a respondents (51%) said managers supported workers to speak up.
- Sixty-nine per cent (69%) of respondents said that speaking up was used in their organisation to identify learning and make improvements.
- Almost two-third of respondents (66%) 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 8-percentage point increase compared to responses in the previous survey (58% 2021).
- Two-thirds of respondents (66%) identified retaliation/suffering as a result of speaking up as having a noticeable or very strong barrier to speaking up.
- Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said that disadvantageous and/or demeaning treatment as a result of speaking up was not tolerated in their organisation.
- Eighty-four per cent (84%) of respondents said their organisation was taking action to tackle barriers to speaking up, a nine-percentage point increase compared to the previous results (75%, 2021).
- 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%).

About the National Guardian's Office

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

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

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

There are now over 1,000 Freedom to Speak Up guardians in NHS primary and secondary care and independent sector organisations, national bodies and elsewhere that ensure workers can speak up about any issues which have an impact on their ability to do their job.

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

www.nationalguardian.org.uk

About the National Guardian for the NHS



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

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

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