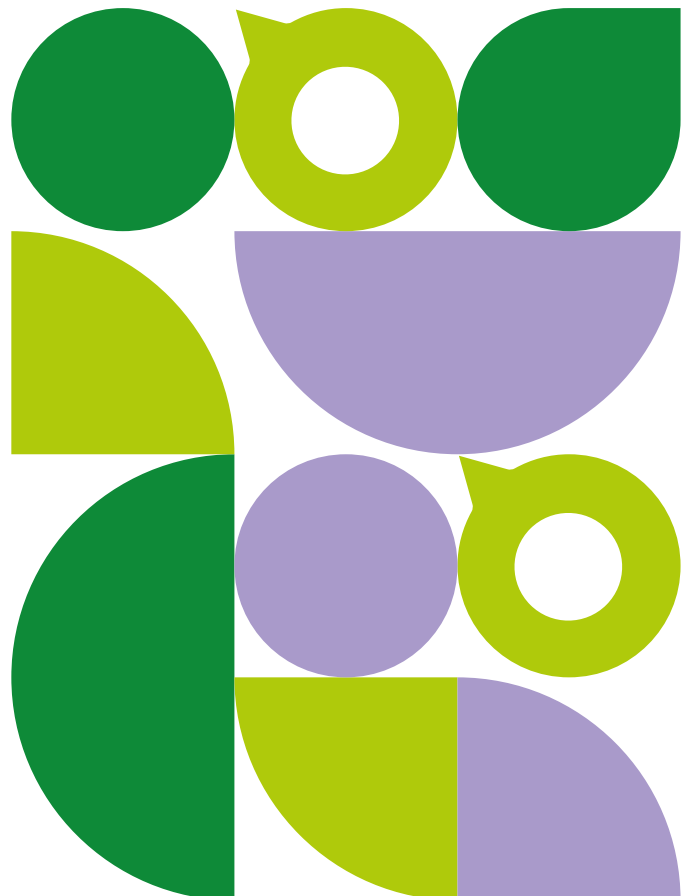




**National Guardian's
Office Annual Report**
April 2023 – March 2024



Making Speaking Up business as usual





National Guardian's Office

Annual Report April 2023 – March 2024

Presented to Parliament by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health by Command of His Majesty

March 2025

CP 1265



OGL

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About Freedom to Speak Up

What is Freedom to Speak Up?

Freedom to Speak Up is about feeling able to speak up about anything that gets in the way of doing a great job. In healthcare that could be a concern about patient safety, a worry about behaviours or attitudes at work, or an idea that could improve processes or make things even better.

About us

The National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office leads, trains and supports a network of Freedom to Speak Up guardians in England. There are more than 1,200 guardians in NHS and independent sector organisations, hospices and national bodies who provide an additional route for workers to speak up when they feel that they are unable to in other ways or do not feel their concerns have been heard through other routes.

We conduct Speak Up reviews to identify learning and support improvement of the speaking up culture of the healthcare sector.

This Annual Report is the seventh from the National Guardian's Office, which is required to be laid before Parliament as a commitment made by the government's response to the Gosport Independent Panel: "To further increase transparency, accountability and to promote culture change the Government has requested the National Guardian to produce an annual report to be laid before Parliament."¹



About Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Freedom to Speak Up guardians provide an additional route to support workers to speak up.

They work to ensure those 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. They also work proactively to support their organisations to tackle barriers to speaking up.

Our vision: that speaking up is business as usual in the healthcare sector in England.

Our mission: to improve workplace cultures, ensuring workers are confident to speak up, by providing expert support, guidance and challenge.

¹Department of Health and Social Care. Learning from Gosport. The Government response to the report of the Gosport Independent Panel. 21 November 2018. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bf55a80ed915d1827f17c39/government-response-to-gosport-independent-panel-report.pdf> Last accessed January 2025.



Ministerial Foreword



Baroness Merron

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for Patient Safety, Women's Health and
Mental Health

I am delighted to be placing before Parliament the seventh National Guardian's annual report. The report highlights the work of the National Guardian's Office (NGO) and role played by Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) Guardians in supporting workers to feel confident to speak up about matters that are concerning them and stopping the delivery of safe and high-quality care.

This latest annual report from the National Guardian's Office shows that the network of local Freedom to Speak Up Guardians throughout healthcare in England has continued to grow with more than 1,200 guardians across healthcare in England. Guardians handled more cases than ever before (over 32,000 cases in 2023/24, a 27% increase on the previous year). It is evident that they are valued and trusted by the workforce. I am grateful to the National Guardian, Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark, for her work with this important network.

Repeated inquiries and investigations have highlighted significant issues with patient safety, and this has seen a deterioration in public confidence.



A common feature in the findings of these inquiries and investigations is that the NHS needs to get better at welcoming and listening to concerns raised by staff. The 2023 NHS staff results showed the percentage of workers feeling secure enough to raise concerns about unsafe clinical practice has reached a five-year low at 71.3% in 2023. There also remains a persistent number of cases where Guardians indicated that the person speaking up to them may be experiencing detriment.

This tells us there is more work to do to create a culture in which workers feel safe to speak up and where managers and senior leaders welcome speaking up and are ready to listen and act on what they hear. Despite this Guardians are continuing to provide vital support to workers across the NHS, hospices, and the independent sector and I am very grateful for their work.

From the outset, this government has been clear: we will not tolerate NHS managers who silence whistleblowers. It is hugely important that to change the culture in the NHS, NHS staff have the confidence to speak out and come forward if they have concerns.

Last November, the Department of Health and Social Care launched a consultation on options for regulating NHS managers. This is a first step towards ensuring that the NHS has strong and effective leadership in place, and to help drive cultural change.

Freedom to Speak Up continues to make progress in improving workplace culture, and importantly the wellbeing of our healthcare workers. The achievements outlined in this report provide a good foundation to continue to build on.



Foreword



Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark

National Guardian

It is an honour to share the work of the National Guardian's Office and Freedom to Speak Up guardians in this Annual Report.

This year, the ability of workers to feel confident to speak up has been at the forefront of the news, as the trial of the nurse Lucy Letby has highlighted. Concerns about babies' safety were first raised in 2016, when the Freedom to Speak Up Review recommendations were beginning to be implemented, and although we have seen much improvement since then, there remains so much more to be done.

The 2023 NHS Staff Survey gave us a snapshot of what it feels like to work in the NHS today; I was disappointed at the lack of improvement in worker perceptions of how safe they feel to speak up. This is despite Freedom to Speak Up guardians handling more than 30,000 cases - a 27.6 per cent increase on last year. Four-fifths of those who gave feedback said they would speak up again.



I am hearing increasingly of instances of guardians facing detriment themselves for doing their job. Mistreating a guardian for raising concerns cannot be tolerated. I am exploring how we might seek further protection of Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

People come to their guardians for several reasons. Nearly two in every five cases (38.5 per cent) involved an element of inappropriate behaviours and attitudes. In healthcare, we are in the relationships business and an organisation's culture is a patient safety issue.

There are pockets of excellent practice across the NHS. Following the Ockenden Reports, our own Speak Up Review and the subsequent cultural review into ambulance trusts, the improvement in results for ambulance workers and the perceptions of midwives show what can be done to improve workers' experience.

The say/do gap

My first take-away from the survey is that there appears to be a say/do gap, where organisations are saying one thing, but workers are experiencing another. The majority (86 per cent) felt their organisation encouraged them to report errors, near misses or incidents, but almost 50,000 respondents felt workers are not treated fairly if involved in this type of incident. This year, those who feel confident to speak up about unsafe clinical practice is at a five-year low. To compound this, the confidence of medical professionals to raise clinical safety concerns has declined by around six percentage points since 2021 (69.4 per cent in 2023 compared to 75.1 per cent in 2021).



The largest drops are for confidence in raising clinical practice concerns and feeling they will be addressed, suggesting that patient safety concerns are less likely to be addressed.

Are leaders listening?

These figures must focus the minds of those who lead healthcare organisations. If your people feel they cannot speak up about matters affecting patient care, how can you be assured that you are delivering your best for patients?

Freedom to Speak Up guardians handled over **30,000 cases** in 2023/24 – **an increase of 27.6%**

The importance of belonging

My second take-away is the importance of belonging. There is a strong correlation between results for the question about inclusion ('I think that my organisation respects individual differences (for example, cultures, working styles, backgrounds, ideas)' and the speak up question, 'If I spoke up about something that concerned me, I am confident my organisation would address my concern'. Those organisations that people feel are more inclusive, are also those where people feel more confident their concerns will be addressed. We are also seeing improvements in the confidence of some ethnic minority workers who respond to the survey.



When I visit organisations, I ask senior leaders to look at these results, but also to listen to the silence. Who are you not hearing from? Why are you not hearing from them? What more can you be doing? Speaking up starts with a conversation.

This year, I launched my refreshed strategy for the work of my office: improving workplace cultures, ensuring workers are confident to speak up, by providing expert support, guidance and challenge.

What does change look like?

Last year, we shared our first Speak Up Review into the speaking up culture of ambulance trusts in England. We found instances of bullying, harassment and discrimination, and of behaviours that stopped people feeling able speak up. We welcomed NHS England's culture review of ambulance trusts, published in February 2024, and the creation of the delivery board. The commitment of the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives and its willingness to work in partnership with stakeholders to make the recommendations a reality across the system is welcome and it will be critical to success.

The NHS Staff Survey results show an improvement in the responses from workers in ambulance trusts. This is heartening and the good work which the Speak Up Review inspired, must be sustained. But how do we spread this throughout the sector?



For some this may be considered in the ‘too difficult’ box. I am grateful to the Freedom to Speak Up guardians who work in these organisations, for your tireless commitment. Freedom to Speak Up guardians do not consider their role to be one where a box is ticked. They take the guardian values and the principles seriously.

This year we implemented mandatory annual refresher training, to further give confidence that all Freedom to Speak Up guardians on our directory had the knowledge and skills to support workers. We wrote to leaders whose guardians had not completed training, as it is of concern that these guardians did not have sufficient time and resource to do all aspects of their role and keep up-to-date with training and developments in the speaking up landscape.

Leaders hold the key

Leaders hold the key, and I am pleased NHS England is working to implement the Kark Review recommendations and has firmly included speaking up in its competency framework for leaders and that chairs will be appraised accordingly.

When workers are engaged, they are more likely to be retained. We are grateful to the large numbers of internationally educated workers who have joined the NHS to fill the large numbers of vacancies and care for patients. We have listened to concerns these workers face challenges to speaking up and being heard, and so have initiated a Speak Up Review to understand more about those barriers.



We are determined to share the voices of workers and building on our Speak Up Review of ambulance trusts, we will conduct further Speak Up Reviews to identify and address systemic challenges. These reports will not only raise awareness of critical issues but also recommend concrete actions for improvement, holding organisations accountable for positive change.



Year at a glance

Spring and summer 2023

- › Summer of skills sharing for guardians.
- › Appointed our first independent chair, Suzanne McCarthy.
- › The Annual Data report was published (July 2023).
- › The Fear and Futility report was published (June 2023).



Autumn 2023

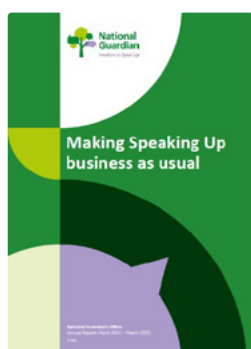
- › Speak Up Month held. #BreakingFTSUBarriers
- › Freedom to Speak Up posters in 16 languages published.





Winter 2023/24

- › We began development of a new strategy.
- › Annual report put before Parliament.
- › Refresher training completed by continuing guardians.



Spring 2024

- › More than 700 people took part in the annual conference.
- › The NHS Staff Survey showed NHS workers' confidence in speaking up remained stable from the previous year.





Chair



Suzanne McCarthy

Independent Chair of the National Guardian's Office Accountability and Liaison Board

My first year as Chair of the National Guardian Office's Accountability and Liaison Board has seen the board take forward the renewal and refresh of the organisation's strategic focus, while also continuing to support Freedom to Speak Up guardians through maintaining oversight of the office's work.

Improving workplace cultures, ensuring workers are confident to speak up, by providing expert support, guidance and challenge.

The new strategy builds on the significant achievements of the National Guardian's Office over recent years, which were aimed in making it safer to speak up. But feeling safe is a bare minimum – what our new five-year strategy targets is to build confidence so that workers feel encouraged and supported in speaking up. I have been impressed with the breadth of work conducted during the year. A key element of which is the speak up reviews that identify learning, recognise innovation and support improvement.



The speak up review into ambulance trusts, published in February 2023, has brought about significant action and change. It found that the culture in ambulance trusts in England was having a negative impact on workers' ability to speak up. Due to the review, NHS England commissioned an independent review into the ambulance sector. This reported in February 2024 and a culture delivery board was established to support ambulance trusts in implementing the recommendations in the independent review.

In March 2024, a speak up review was initiated to understand the speaking up experiences of overseas-trained workers. It aims to develop recommendations that will foster an inclusive and supportive speak up culture throughout healthcare.

As Chair, I spoke at the Emergency Services Show in September 2023 and the Protect charity's 30th anniversary event in October 2023, focusing on improving workplace cultures to create environments that foster confidence among workers to speak.

I was able to meet guardians, including at the national conference, and this event gave me the opportunity to introduce myself and explain the work of the board.

Jacqui Coles, a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at King's College Hospital London, allowed me to shadow her for a day in July 2023. It was my great pleasure to meet, if only virtually, with guardian networks across the country, plus the hospice and non-provider networks. I am grateful to the guardians who took the time to meet and tell me about their work, concerns and ambitions for guardians.



The board is enthusiastic in its support of the new strategy and the independent work done by the National Guardian's Office. I am keen to continue to work closely with the office's sponsors, the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and the Care Quality Commission in support of this work.

“I look forward to working with all of you to grow speak up cultures in healthcare and beyond.”



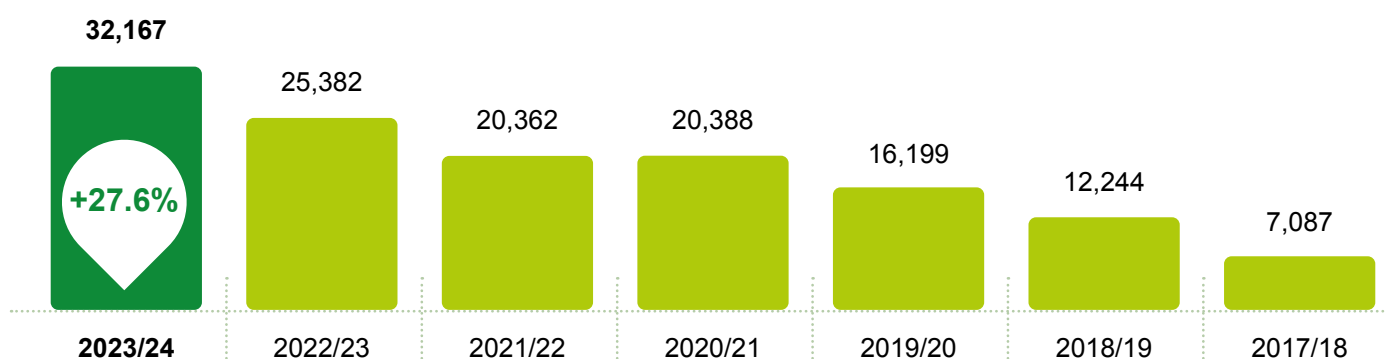
Speaking up in healthcare

This year, Freedom to Speak Up guardians have handled more cases than ever before. This is credit to the efforts made by guardians to foster trust and break down barriers to speaking up within their organisations.

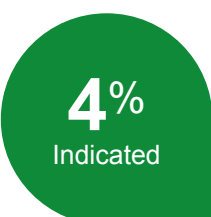


Speaking up to Freedom to Speak Up guardians

(32,167 cases were raised with Freedom to Speak Up guardians in 2023/24).



32,167 cases - This is the highest number of cases ever recorded - a 27.6 per cent increase from 2022/23.



Detriment for speaking up was indicated in **4 per cent** of cases, the same as in 2022/23.



9.5%

Cases raised

The percentage of cases which were raised **anonymously** was **9.5 per cent**. This was similar to the percentage raised anonymously in 2022/23 (9.4%).

79.8%

Speak up again

Four-fifths (**79.8 per cent**) of those who gave feedback said **they would speak up again**.

What are people speaking up about to guardians?

32.3%



One in every three cases raised (32.3 per cent) involved an element of worker safety or wellbeing. An increase from one in every four cases (27.6 per cent) in 2022/23.

38.5%



Two in every five cases raised (38.5 per cent) involved an element of inappropriate behaviours and attitudes - the most reported theme in 2023/24.



19.8%

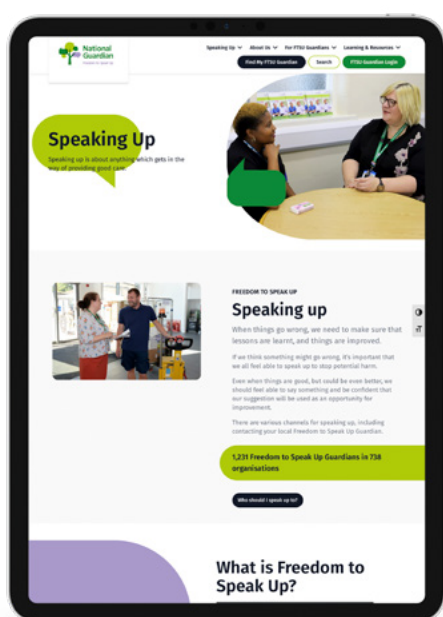


19.8 per cent of cases reported included an element of bullying or harassment. A two-percentage point fall compared to 2022/23.

18.7%

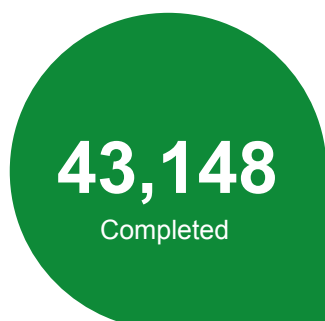


18.7 per cent of cases raised included an element of patient safety/quality, a marginal drop compared to 2022/23 (19.4 per cent).





Championing workers



Strategic aim: to champion and support workers to speak up

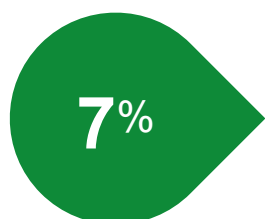
National Guardian's Office training completed on e-learning for health platform



Speak up module completed on e-learning for health platform: 34,653 (80%)



Listen up module on e-learning for health platform: 5,562 (13%)



Follow up module on e-learning for health platform: 2,933 (7%)



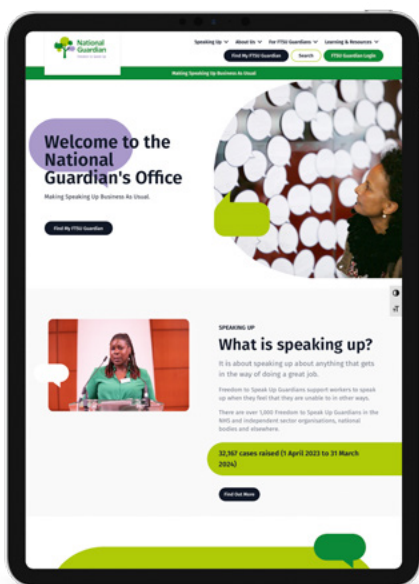
43,148

Completed

Website

Visitors to our website

(up from 358,877 in 2022/23)



+49%
Increase

+75%
Increase

Find My Guardian page

> 196,390 views (up from 111,721 in 2022/23)

+12%
Increase

Speak Up Pledges made on our website

> 1,929 pledges (up from 1,719 in 2022/23)



Case study: 100 Voices – listening to trainees



Emma Randle

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust

Two trainee nursing associates separately contacted Emma Randle, Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust, because they were worried that they were expected to perform procedures that they were not qualified to do.

The trainees occasionally worked as bank staff. There was a disconnect between what was expected of them as bank staff and what was permitted by their university as trainees. They were uncomfortable being unsupervised undertaking Level 3 one-to-one therapeutic observations, which are required for extremely vulnerable patients with complex needs. Level 3 is used where there are concerns that the patient could harm themselves or others and means they must be within eyesight of staff and accessible at all times, day and night.

The trainees were worried that something might go wrong, because they were taught that they were not yet qualified to conduct these observations unsupervised. Yet, they were expected to when employed as bank staff.



The students came from separate wards and had both raised this issue with their ward managers, who responded that ‘this is how it’s always been done’. Worried about the potential risk to patient safety, the trainees approached Emma as the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

Emma discovered that the trust’s supportive observations policy was difficult to interpret as there was no reference made to trainee nursing associates or registered nurse degree apprenticeship students when they were employed as bank staff. She raised the issue with the chief nurse and Freedom to Speak Up Lead, Steve Forsyth, who requested a review of the policy. Following this, changes were made, recognising that there should be standardised guidance for all nursing roles across all directorates.

This reassured the trainees who now have clear guidance around conducting observations.

Emma said: “The trainees who raised their concerns created a safer environment for patients by speaking up. I encourage trainees and students to speak up as they are a fresh pair of eyes on the service and systems. Statistically within the first two years of a healthcare career, workers are most likely to speak up. I make a particular effort to be present at student nurses’ inductions and regularly walking the floor to ensure I am visible on wards. I encourage everyone to be inquisitive, curious and questioning.”



Speak Up Reviews

One of the ways we champion the voices of workers is through our Speak Up Reviews.



Listening to Workers

In 2023, we published, *Listening to Workers*, outlining our findings and recommendations following our review of speaking up in ambulance trusts.

We recommended an independent cultural review of ambulance trusts, which has been completed, leading to key recommendations aimed at improving organisational culture. These include balancing operational and people performance, enhancing leadership and management practices, addressing bullying and harassment, and prioritising human resources and organisational development functions. NHS England has accepted these recommendations, and a Culture Review Delivery Board has been established to oversee their implementation.

In our report, we stated that we expect to see an improvement in the speaking up culture of ambulance trusts if our recommendations were actioned, and the 2023 NHS Staff Survey shows improvements in the Freedom to Speak Up sub-score for ambulance trusts, although these scores still lag behind other NHS trust types.

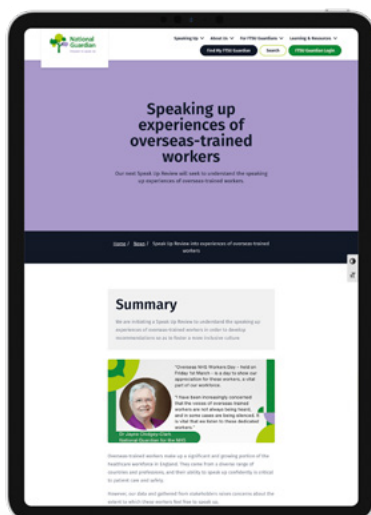


While much progress has been made, implementation of the recommendations remains varied and incomplete, requiring continued focus to ensure full adoption. This includes providing adequate support for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role. We would like to see these initial efforts sustained in order to foster a safe and open culture for speaking up within all ambulance trusts.

Current Speak Up Review

Overseas-trained workers make up a significant and growing portion of the healthcare workforce in England. However, our data and intelligence have raised concerns about the extent to which these workers feel free to speak up.

In March 2024 we began a Speak Up Review to understand the speaking up experiences of overseas-trained workers, identify barriers and highlight examples of good and innovative practices. Our aim is to develop actionable recommendations out of this Review in order to improve policies and practices, fostering a more inclusive and supportive Speak Up culture throughout healthcare.





SECamb case study: Transforming the culture of Speaking Up at South East Coast Ambulance Service Trust



Kim Blakeburn

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

In the 2023 NHS Staff Survey, South East Coast Ambulance Service was the most improved trust in the country for its Freedom to Speak Up sub-score. Notably, 52.8 per cent of respondents said they feel safe speaking up about their concerns - an increase of nearly eight percentage points.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, Kim Blakeburn says: “Our new Chief Executive Officer, Simon Weldon, really values Freedom to Speak Up and his support has permeated through the management layers. Previously there was a sense that the organisation itself did not really value it, that it was just a tick box exercise. The change in leadership, combined with the focus generated by the Speak Up Review into ambulance trusts, has changed the mindset at the top of the trust. As a sector, ambulance trusts are focused on operational performance statistics - waiting times and other quality indicators. Freedom to Speak Up is equally an indicator of our performance, and so we developed a Freedom to Speak Up dashboard.



“The dashboard uses a purple-red-amber-green indicator rating. Each case has a 93-day reporting process consistent with human resources reporting processes, and uses a seven-day resolution timeframe for any priority speaking up case. This data is anonymised and fed into a dashboard that can show areas of concern, through the indicators. Local management, as well as senior leaders, can use the data to understand speaking up trends and themes.

“The dashboard allows me to speak to leaders in the language they understand, and has seen us move from simply being reactive to cases raised, to a move towards being proactive in working towards removing the barriers, which can stop people from speaking up – fear and futility. We have established a ‘detriment toolkit’, which identifies the cases that may put people at risk from detriment for speaking up, so those people are actively supported. The dashboard highlights the percentage of cases so we can proactively take action to combat it.

“We know that one of the barriers to speaking up is the belief that nothing will be done. In response to cases involving vehicle collisions, the Freedom to Speak Up guardians commissioned a task and finish group that identified actions that could be implemented to make quick improvements. Being able to look at data by work areas has sparked curious conversations with local managers about what they can be doing as a team to make improvements. The dashboard has helped managers to feel that Freedom to Speak Up is also their responsibility. It makes it easier for them to recognise how it makes a difference.”



Simon Weldon, CEO at South East Coast Ambulance Service Trust said: “Our people feeling safe to speak up is absolutely vital for us as an organisation, not only to be able to address concerns people may have but equally importantly, as an opportunity to learn and improve.

“It’s also of paramount importance that as leaders, once our people have spoken up, we really listen to what is being said and follow up however is needed. I am proud of the progress that we have made in developing our speaking up culture in SECamb but by no means complacent, and remain absolutely committed to building on this as we move forwards.”



Overcoming barriers

There are many barriers that can stop people from speaking up.

Being afraid of what might happen or feeling that they won't be listened to. Worrying because of their background, their heritage or their experience. They may feel they might not be listened to because of their banding, their circumstances or their job role.

To help trusts and organisations breakdown barriers, the National Guardian's Office runs board development sessions with leaders to help them be curious about their data and to address the barriers they have in their organisations.

NHS Staff Survey

There is minimal change nationally for three out of the four Freedom to Speak Up questions, however, results for raising concerns about clinical practice are at their lowest since 2019.



71% - 'would feel secure raising concerns about unsafe clinical practice'



62%



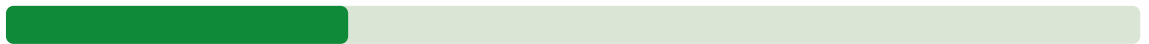
62% - 'confident that my organisation would address my concern'

57%



57% - 'feel safe to speak up about anything that concerns me in this organisation'

30%



30% - 'confident my organisation would address my concern if I spoke up about something that concerned me'



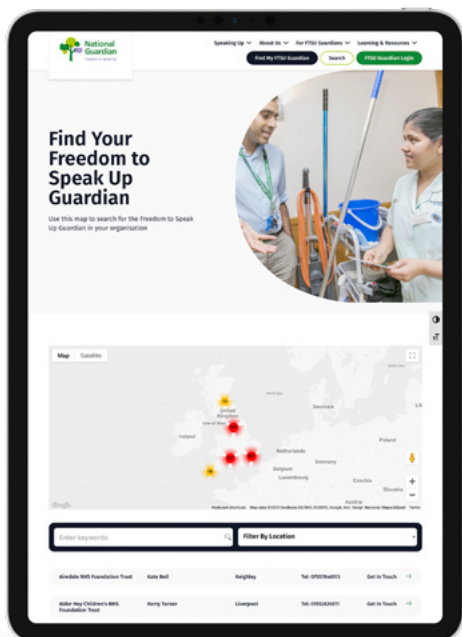
Speak Up month

The theme for 2023's Speak Up was overcoming the barriers to speaking up. Barriers include fear of detriment and lack of confidence that the organisation would address concerns.

Impact of Speak Up month:

Visits to find my guardian page of website:

- > October 2023: 23,941 – the highest number recorded
- > September 2023: 25% increase
- > October 2022: 19% increase



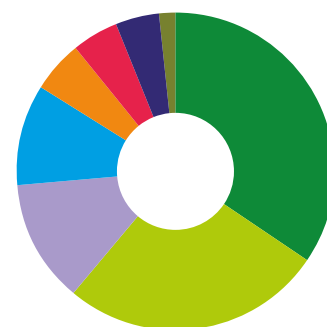


Freedom to Speak Up guardians

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role is complex, and the landscape in which guardians operate is constantly evolving. The network has grown from just 200 guardians in NHS Trusts in 2017 to more than 1,000 guardians supporting a wide range of organisations. The National Guardian’s Office continues to support this growing network of guardians.

Total number of guardians (at 31 March 2024)

NHS Trust/Foundation Trust.....	413
Independent healthcare provider.....	321
Primary care	151
Hospice.....	122
Integrated Care Systems.....	63
Other.....	58
Regulators	52
Private ambulance.....	18



Number of new guardians trained
(1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024)



Number of guardians who completed refresher training
(1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024)



Mentor conversations

During the year, April 2023 to March 2024, there were 318 reflective conversations with a trained guardian mentor.

There are 32 mentors currently in our network.

There are quarterly mentor meetings facilitated by the National Guardian's Office Guardian Support and Policy Team. The meetings are an opportunity to discuss challenges and successes. Mentors say they value their conversations with guardians and that for new guardians, the conversations help them reflect if they have the correct support in place from their organisation to meet the expectations of the role.

Refresher training 2023

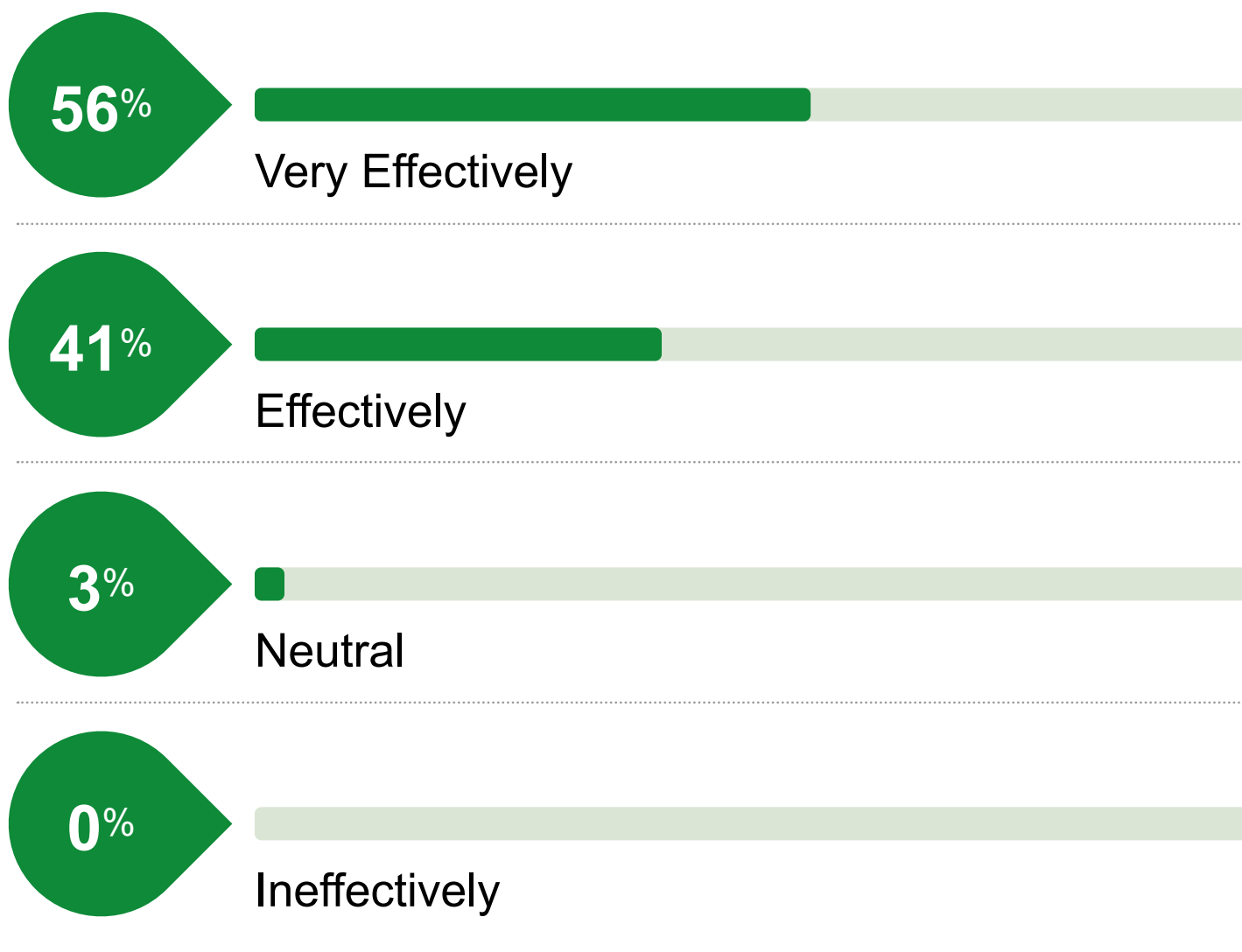
569 guardians completed refresher training 2023/24

Refresher training supports Freedom to Speak Up guardians' continued professional development and is an annual training requirement. Refresher training is self-assessed using reflective learning and referring to the key considerations for further learning and or revision. By the end of this training, Freedom to Speak Up guardians understand:

- › Reporting to senior leadership
- › Speaking truth to power
- › Raising awareness of Freedom to Speak Up
- › Conflicts of interest
- › Sharing information.



How effectively did the training meet its aims and objectives?



What was the most useful part of the training?

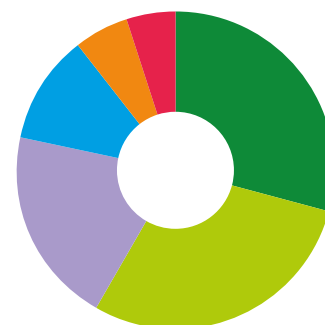
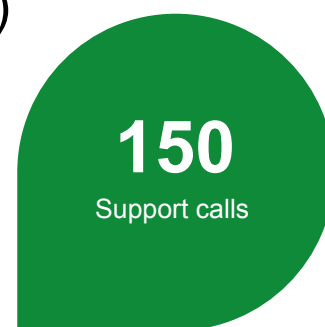
“Encouraging me to reflect on what I would have done. And write it down. This really gets you thinking about the scenarios, record keeping, conflict of interest, boundaries and reporting.”

“Reflecting on the case studies - it felt as though these focused on some of the key issues we discuss as Guardians. They helped embed what you know and the summary highlighted any gaps.”



Total number of guardians (at 31 March 2024)

Themes*	Numbers
Support in the role	61
Wellbeing	61
Case support	42
FTSU guardian role expectations	23
Data	12
Detriment	10



*calls may have involved multiple themes hence not adding up to the total number of calls.

Communities of practice sessions

Two communities of practice sessions attended by 83 guardians.

One session was aimed at guardians from primary care and small organisations.

The sessions explored questions relating to what they value about being a guardian and the pressures of their role. The sessions explored how to support workers effectively, for example, fear of detriment and protecting confidentiality. They discussed practical challenges such as time pressures, building trust and developing a communications plan.

“I have found the session really valuable. It was good to share experiences and reassuring to know that I am not alone in some of the challenges I face!” Freedom to Speak Up Guardian



NHS Greater Manchester ICB case study: **Primary care guardians at NHS Manchester**



Luzani Moyo

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

For seven years, Luzani Moyo has championed his role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at Yorkshire Ambulance Service, Derby Hospitals, and now for Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board (ICB).

Luzani says: “Working as the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at an ICB brings an opportunity for me to embed Freedom to Speak Up across a system. Primary care is an important and often overlooked part of the healthcare system, where workers can feel ‘done to’ rather than ‘with’, so I was keen to learn more.”

Luzani surveyed primary care providers about their Freedom to Speak Up arrangements, receiving 57 responses. He found:

- › The majority of primary care-based guardians who responded to the survey have not had any training from the National Guardian’s Office.
- › Only nine of the guardians from the primary care providers who responded are registered with the National Guardian’s Office.



- › A very small number of guardians have protected time to carry out the Freedom to Speak Up role.
- › A low number of the appointed Freedom to Speak Up guardians were recruited into post via an external advert or open recruitment.
- › Of those who responded, only ten of the guardians submit any quarterly data to the National Guardian's Office, and it is highly likely there is no reporting to locality or professional group area.
- › Most of the guardians have not completed their mandated annual refresher training.
- › Regional or national network support for the Freedom to Speak Up guardians who are currently in post are provided only to registered guardians.
- › There is a lack of shared learning, good practice, or triangulation of data.

Luzani has also surveyed almost 2,000 providers across Greater Manchester, and the results will be shared with the Primary Care Blueprint Implementation Group. In response to Luzani's work, the National Guardian's Office will establish greater communications with primary care and integrated care boards in 2024/25.



Luzani says: **“I feel privileged to be in the guardian role,** giving NHS workers a valuable opportunity to be heard and acting as someone to anchor workers together when they are drifting away. I’m not afraid of failure, am supported, and have the space to try new things. I have buy-in from the executive team who prioritise Freedom to Speak Up and see it as the right thing to do, not just an added extra. ICBs are an opportunity to level things up across the country, and I look forward to formulating support networks and continuing to establish communities of practice to improve speaking up cultures.”

Mark Fisher CBE, Chief Executive Officer, NHS Greater Manchester, said: “Freedom to Speak Up should be seen as a vehicle for promoting a transparent, learning culture. It allows staff to raise concerns about any type of work-related issue, not just those related to patient safety. As Chief Executive of NHS Greater Manchester, I have made Freedom to Speak Up one of my top priorities.

“NHS Greater Manchester was one of the very first ICBs to employ a full-time Freedom to Speak Up Guardian to lead on the Freedom to Speak Up agenda and help the organisation develop its Freedom to Speak Up offer both within NHS Greater Manchester and across primary care, social care, and the voluntary community and social enterprise sector.

“Luzani knows that he has my full support and that of all the senior leadership.”



NHS Somerset ICB case study: **Embedding Speak Up culture in Somerset**



Emma Symonds

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

In the 2023 NHS Staff Survey, NHS Somerset ICB emerged as the top performer for the Freedom to Speak Up sub-score among all participating ICBs.

The ICB plays a vital role in bringing together the NHS, Somerset Council and voluntary sector partners to work as one integrated care system and is responsible for commissioning health and care services for 580,000 residents. Emma Symonds was appointed the ICB's Freedom to Speak Up Guardian in 2022, having previously carried out a similar role at Yeovil Hospital.

Emma says: “The role of a guardian is all about hearing people’s authentic lived experiences and enabling workers to share those in moments of stress and adversity. The key to ensuring that people speak out comes down to knowing your community. You must get to know your community – inject yourself into people’s work spaces and engage with colleagues across all levels of the organisation.



“To get to know our community at NHS Somerset ICB, I proactively engage with all colleagues, aware that not all workers are in clinical roles, join team meetings or attend away days.

“I know I can’t achieve a culture of psychological safety on my own and feel well supported in my role. I have a small network of Freedom to Speak Up champions who do a great job helping me raise awareness of Freedom to Speak Up. The organisation re-launched Freedom to Speak Up last year, which has resulted in increased speaking up cases. I am delighted to see our efforts have also paid off in this year’s NHS staff survey results.

“The executive team helped with the relaunch by explaining what Freedom to Speak Up is to workers, signposting the guardian role and sharing their Freedom to Speak Up pledges.”

Jonathan Higman, Chief Executive, NHS Somerset said, “I am proud to see that we were ranked as the top ICB in the country in the 2023 NHS staff survey results. Making Freedom to Speak Up an integral part of our organisation has been an important focus for us since becoming an ICB.

“We wanted to create a place where people felt safe and enabled to speak up, ensuring they had confidence in the process and knew that their concerns would be listened too, and where relevant, actioned. We knew from previous staff surveys that these were key areas for improvement, ensuring improved visibility, process, and approach.”



“Our Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has worked tirelessly with the executive team to embed Freedom to Speak Up within NHS Somerset, building trust and belief in the process. Recruiting local champions who sit across the organisation has been key, they are not only available to their local directorates but are able to lend a listening ear to those who need someone to hear them. They have taken time to attend local team meetings, answer questions and provide reassurance.

“During Speak Up month we encouraged colleagues to pledge their commitment to speaking up, raising awareness through our internal newsletters and colleague briefings focussing on bringing it back to what really matters, the individual and their concern.

“I am incredibly proud of how far we have come and what our team has achieved over the past year, and I know that this is only the beginning.”



Networks and leadership



Karyn Richards-Wright

Chair of London Network

I have been the chair of the London Network of Guardians for nearly four years and feel privileged to work alongside such dedicated and passionate Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

During my time as chair, I have worked closely with and supported many guardians from a wide range of organisations, I am always so impressed by the experiences of the London region guardians and success stories we hear at our meetings. As guardians, we often have to be very resilient and determined when raising issues on behalf of the workers who come to us. While we all agree that our role makes a significant difference to patient and worker safety, it is a hard role and can be challenging speaking up to power.



I am so proud to have seen so many guardians flourish and grow in confidence within their role. As part of the London network, we meet fortnightly to discuss our experiences and gain support from our peers and quarterly for training/information sessions often inviting guest speakers to attend. The London region guardians have a wealth of experience and we make a point of ensuring that we offer support in a safe environment.

The role of the guardian is certainly not for the faint hearted! We do excellent work, however, the role can be very isolating and as such myself and vice chair Jacqui Coles often meet with new guardians and guardians who require additional support to ensure that we spend time offering one-to-one support. The disparity between organisations as to the resources that guardians have is quite concerning at times and certainly takes a toll on the wellbeing of guardians, especially those guardians who work alone within their organisation. At times, the network meetings may be the only time some guardians get to speak to someone who actually understands fully the challenges they face on a daily basis.

Being a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is one of the few roles that works with absolutely every ward, department and worker within the organisation regardless of profession, banding or grade. It's a wonderfully rewarding position to be in and my time as regional chair and Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has encouraged me and my fellow guardians to challenge ourselves, think outside of the box and draw on skills we at times didn't know we had.



Following feedback from our network guardians, I know that I speak on behalf of the London network when I say that without the support of the network many of us would not have been as successful in our roles or been able to continue in our roles as long as we have. The support of guardian networks is an integral part of the role of the guardian and I am so very proud that I have been able to facilitate this support within the region alongside Jacqui.

“It’s a great feeling knowing that what we do as regional chairs helps to educate and protect the wellbeing of the guardians within our region thus contributing to improved patient, worker safety and learning within healthcare in the UK.”



Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital NHS Foundation Trust case study: Improving safety to Speak Up in Liverpool



In the 2023 NHS Staff Survey, Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital (LHCH) NHS Foundation Trust's Freedom to Speak Up sub-score was the highest across all NHS Trusts. Its performance for the 'We each have a voice that counts' theme was significantly improved from the previous year, with more than 79 per cent of respondents saying they felt safe to speak up about anything that concerned them.



Freedom to Speak Up guardians Helen Martin and Ceri Thomas say the organisation's culture starts at the very top. "We are a small specialist trust and there is a definite environment of being 'one team'," says Ceri, who works exclusively as a guardian. "Leaders have an open door policy on incident reporting. It doesn't matter who is speaking up or how they do it. For example, we have anonymous post boxes in common areas so that people who don't wish to be identified can still raise their concerns." She works with Helen, who combines her guardian duties with her role as Head of Risk Management, and says: "Freedom to Speak Up supports risk management as a way for organisations to hear about matters early, so they can be acted upon before they become bigger issues."

They feel supported by the Freedom to Speak Up Non-executive Director, Margaret Carney and the trust's Chief Executive, Liz Bishop, who have attended a number of the quarterly meetings the team holds with the 26 Freedom to Speak Up champions. Margaret says: "As the non-executive lead for Freedom to Speak Up at LHCH, I am proud to be part of an organisation that values and nurtures its listening and learning culture. Freedom to Speak Up is an important part of that culture, and the Board seeks out every opportunity to ensure that everyone feels able to speak up and be heard so that our services and staff are the best they can be."



Ceri adds: “People’s experience is what counts the most. I work on being as visible as possible – visiting night shift workers, having business cards that people can pick up, connecting with international nurse ambassadors and staff networks, posters with photos of champions so they are recognisable. But you can’t replace word of mouth - how you respond as a guardian to their experience.”

Although the Trust is rated as outstanding by the Care Quality Commission, the Freedom to Speak Up guardians strive to do better. “There is always room for improvement,” says Helen.

Liz says: “Since joining LHCH, I have been delighted to encounter and respond to our open, supportive and learning culture. A core part of this is our approach to Freedom to Speak Up, which is not only well embedded but also makes a powerful statement to our teams that their views and experiences matter. As a Board we have committed to a structure that listens, understands and responds without preconception.” Helen adds: “Liz positively demonstrates that everyone is a Freedom to Speak Up champion. At monthly all-colleague meetings she makes a Speak Up pledge as the CEO, which really sets the tone at the top.”



Partnership working



Nick Hodgetts

Chair, Freedom to Speak Up National
Non-Provider Guardian Network

Working with NHS England and the Care Quality Commission

In April 2023, the National Guardian's Office renewed its three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with NHS England and Care Quality Commission.

The MoU represents a collaborative commitment to promoting a culture of openness, trust and transparency across the healthcare system based on a framework of support, governance, and communication.

The overarching goal of our partnership is to support healthcare workers to speak up about concerns without fear of detriment, ultimately driving improvements in patient care, worker wellbeing, and organisational accountability.

The relationship is founded on the shared goal of creating an open, trust-based environment where speaking up is encouraged and seen as a critical to continuous improvement and patient safety across the NHS.



Principles of collaboration

- › Creating a culture of openness and trust in the NHS
- › Ensuring workers can speak up without fear of recrimination
- › Promoting safe, high-quality healthcare
- › Respecting the independence of each organisation
- › Maintaining public confidence
- › Protecting the confidentiality of individuals who speak up
- › Working efficiently and effectively.

The Non-Provider Network (NNP) numbers continued to grow during 2023/24, at one point peaking at around 140 members.

The group's biggest success has been supporting guardians in Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), through their evolving challenges of providing speaking up support. This has been especially important for workers in primary care who were speaking up.

But it has been a continuing challenge for ICB guardians, who have sought clarity and guidance on providing support to organisations within the changing NHS environment. Because the Freedom to Speak Up process has not been clear, these challenges have dominated NNP network discussions.



Guardians within NHS England, who have been through the merger of Health Education England with NHS England, NHS Digital and the NHS Transformation Directorate, have also supported ICB guardians going through restructures themselves, allowing them to “pay it forward” from their own experiences.

The ICB guardians developed plans to create their own network in 2024, which will bring NNP Network membership back to 56 members. The NNP will use this opportunity for us to re-grow and re-focus on issues across all member organisations, while wishing the ICB guardians well and providing them the space they need to develop their new network.



Learning from others

The 2024 conference

Freedom to Speak Up guardians from across healthcare and other sectors came together at the National Guardian's Office conference in March 2024.

Freedom to Speak Up guardians from across healthcare and other sectors came together at the National Guardian's Office conference in March 2024. At the event, guardians heard from members of the National Guardian's Office Pan Sector Network. Joining the panel were **Timothy Graveney**, Ethics and Compliance Officer and Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at HCA Healthcare UK, **Andy Noble**, Head of Whistleblowing and Speak Up at the NatWest Group, **William Richards**, Head of Whistleblowing at the BBC, and **Rachael Saunders**, Deputy Director at the Institute of Business Ethics.

Delegates heard that communicating an organisation's speak up framework is essential in building trust and confidence among workers.

Andy Noble said his team sends quarterly updates to 60,000 NatWest employees across the globe. The updates talk about the themes and actions taken. Andy said: "It tells colleagues that people are speaking up and what actions were taken."



” Rachael Saunders said embedding a speak up culture among leadership was essential, while William Richards said building trust and confidence at the BBC was: “An ongoing project, it never ends. Leaders need to accept that it’s not taboo to speak up about issues when they happen.” Timothy Graveney said he preferred to talk positively at HCA UK about speaking up, saying that using ‘whistleblowing’ can frighten some people who see whistleblowers suffering detriment. Both William and Andy said they were part of sector-wide groups promoting speaking up in the media and banking industries and learning from one another’s successes and challenges. When asked what piece of advice the speakers had found helpful when starting their roles, William said: “Set expectations with the person speaking up of what you can do for them.” Andy said: “Put yourself in the shoes of the person raising a concern.” And Tim said: “Just listen and share your desire to help.”



Timothy Graveney

Ethics and Compliance Officer and Freedom to Speak Up Guardian



Andy Noble

Head of Whistleblowing and Speak Up at the NatWest Group



William Richards

Head of Whistleblowing at the BBC



Rachael Saunders

Deputy Director at the Institute of Business Ethics



Speaking up: priorities for research

At the start of 2024, the National Guardian's Office commissioned a team from The Healthcare Improvement Studies Institute, University of Cambridge, and the School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Plymouth, to undertake a project that sought to collate existing sources of data on speaking up, and identify future research priorities relating to speaking up.

The team undertook consultative interviews with 12 key stakeholders working in various roles in and around the NHS, including staff from provider trusts and regulatory bodies, Freedom to Speak Up guardians from clinical and non-clinical backgrounds, and representatives of other stakeholder organisations. They convened a participatory workshop that included around 25 people, including interview participants, contributors from the National Guardian's Office, academics and others with an interest in speaking up, to discuss the preliminary insights from the work.

Participants in consultative interviews and the workshops were asked to consider what they saw as key priorities for future research in relation to speaking up, and these ideas were discussed further during the workshop.



The priorities identified by contributors through the interviews and workshop are listed below: research on speaking up outside the NHS (to inform approaches to improving speaking up within the NHS); research on NHS workers and their willingness and ability to speak up; research relating to the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role; and other potential areas of research relating to speaking up.

A common theme for further research was a need to establish ‘what good looks like’ in speaking up in the NHS.

Researching on speaking up outside NHS

Insights from private sector organisations: Speaking up practices in other industries such as aviation, mining, nuclear and manufacturing might be explored to understand good practice. This may provide learning on how speaking up is identified, encouraged, and reported elsewhere and how this impacts an organisation, including the contribution of dedicated roles.

Insights from other public sector organisations in England: Learning might be collated from organisations such as the fire service, police service and civil service to compare how voice is framed and reported.

Insights from other countries: Approaches taken in healthcare systems in other countries and how they respond to voice might offer a fruitful research focus.



Research on NHS workers and their willingness and ability to speak up

Understanding routes where people are speaking up:

It was suggested that there is a need to understand what routes are being used by NHS workers to raise concerns, how information communicated via these routes is captured, and whether this information gets to board level leadership and others with authority to respond appropriately.

Understanding who is speaking up: Contributors called for more research on the barriers that impede individuals' ability to speak up, understanding who is (and is not) speaking up, what channels they are using to speak up, what is encouraging them to speak up, and particular barriers that disproportionately affect certain groups.

Research relating to the Freedom to Speak up Guardian role

Influences on the guardian's role

Impact of NHS banding and professional background:

The need to understand contextual influences on speaking up such as NHS banding and the clinical or non-clinical background of the guardian was highlighted, along with the impact of these features on how cases are managed and their outcomes.



Impact of organisation: Research might include building understanding of the landscape in which the act of speaking up takes place, and the impact of various organisational contextual factors such as how organisations are run and the way guardians are embedded in their systems on the outcomes of acts of speaking up.

Understanding responses

Leadership support: Contributors highlighted a need to build understanding surrounding the sustainability and capacity of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role given what they saw as variable commitment on the part of senior decision makers in organisations.

Responses of leaders: Further analysis of the impact of speaking up was called for, in particular how the lessons from acts of voice are applied (or not) by organisations in practice.

Response by other support: More research was suggested to understand how line managers respond to and document concerns, and the role of the guardian in mediating this process.



Impact of Guardians on organisations

Impact of Freedom to Speak Up guardians on an organisation: Contributors suggested a need for holistic study of organisations' cultures and the extent to which Freedom to Speak Up guardians have helped to improve it.

Alternative routes to voice: Research with staff and guardians might generate understanding of what processes people would follow if the guardian was not available, and could help identify what issues guardians are well placed to deal with.

Thematic understanding of cases: Thematic reviews and breakdowns, for example, by case type or protected characteristics, might be valuable in establishing whether and how the guardian role facilitates disclosures and supports resolution, which groups are better and worse supported, and how many of these cases are about public interest disclosures.

Understanding what good looks like: One of the most common themes discussed by contributors was a need to establish 'what good looks like' in speaking up in the NHS and what processes are working well.



Other potential areas of research relating to speaking up

Language surrounding speaking up: Several contributors discussed a need to examine how speaking up, whistleblowing and related terms are used in different contexts, including the question of the impact of terminology on how initiatives to encourage voice are received and whether changes are embedded.

Generating more qualitative data: Gaps in the availability and rigour of existing qualitative data were noted by several contributors. It was highlighted that while there is an emphasis on case numbers, greater qualitative data collection would be helpful in understanding what people's priorities are with regard to improvements in support for speaking up.

Investment, training and development: There may be value in assessing the impact of cultural leadership programmes on organisational performance, and efforts to measure the impact of prioritising and investing in speaking up on wider metrics, including clinical and financial ones.

Impact of wider innovations, strategies and models: A need to look at wider initiatives, models and programmes beyond speaking up was highlighted by contributors, to consider their interaction with the speaking up programme and identify possible complementarities. Similarly, some contributors called for more opportunities for staff to contribute ideas and find solutions, with research into digital platforms to enable this.

Wider culture: A wide-ranging focus on the culture of the NHS and how it varies was identified as a possible area for research, to help identify how the NHS might advance positive culture change.



Governance

The National Guardian's Office is funded by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and NHS England. Senior representatives from our funders form the Office's Accountability and Liaison Board, led by an independent Chair.

The Accountability and Liaison Board members for 2023/24 were:

- › **Suzanne McCarthy** – Independent Chair
- › **Dr Ronke Akerele** – Director of Culture Transformation, NHS England
- › **Adam McMordie** – Deputy Director Quality, Patient Safety and Maternity, Department of Health and Social Care
- › **Stephen Marston** – Vice-Chancellor, University of Gloucestershire
- › **Sir Andrew Morris OBE** – Deputy Chair, NHS England
- › **Mark Sutton** – Chief Digital Officer, CQC



The Board meets four times a year. Its overarching purpose is to provide strategic advice to the National Guardian on all matters related to their work portfolio, acting as a link to the boards of the sponsoring organisations. The National Guardian reports at least annually to the boards of CQC and NHS England on the work of the Office. The Office receives advice and support from the Partnership Working Group, whose members are senior leaders drawn from the Office's funding bodies and the Department of Health and Social Care. The Partnership Working Group's purpose is to support the implementation of the National Guardian's work programme by providing insight and advice on emerging priorities and acting as a sounding board for ideas. Liaison between the Office and Partnership Working Group members helps ensure the co-ordination of the organisations' respective work to support speaking up in healthcare.

Finances

The National Guardian's Office was allocated an annual budget of £1,625,462 and spent a total of £1,604,057. Expenditure on pay was £1,128,325.

Prescribed Person

The National Guardian's Office is a 'prescribed person' for the purposes of section 43F of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The office annually reports on the number of 'qualifying disclosures' workers have made to it and how it has responded to those disclosures. See the Prescribed Persons Annual Report 2023/24.



Enquiries to the National Guardian's Office

In 2022/23, the number of enquiries to the National Guardian's Office was 3,303. Of these, 40 per cent were responded to on the same day and a further 42 per cent within five working days. In 2023/24, the number of enquiries to the National Guardian's Office was 3,953. Of these, 54 per cent were answered in the same day and a further 33 per cent answered within five working days.

Structure

The National Guardian for the NHS is supported by a team consisting of 17 staff at 31 March 2024.





Contacts

For more information about the National Guardian's Office visit www.nationalguardian.org.uk

You can contact the office by emailing enquiries@nationalguardianoffice.org.uk

Or phone us on **0191 249 4400**

Our offices are located at
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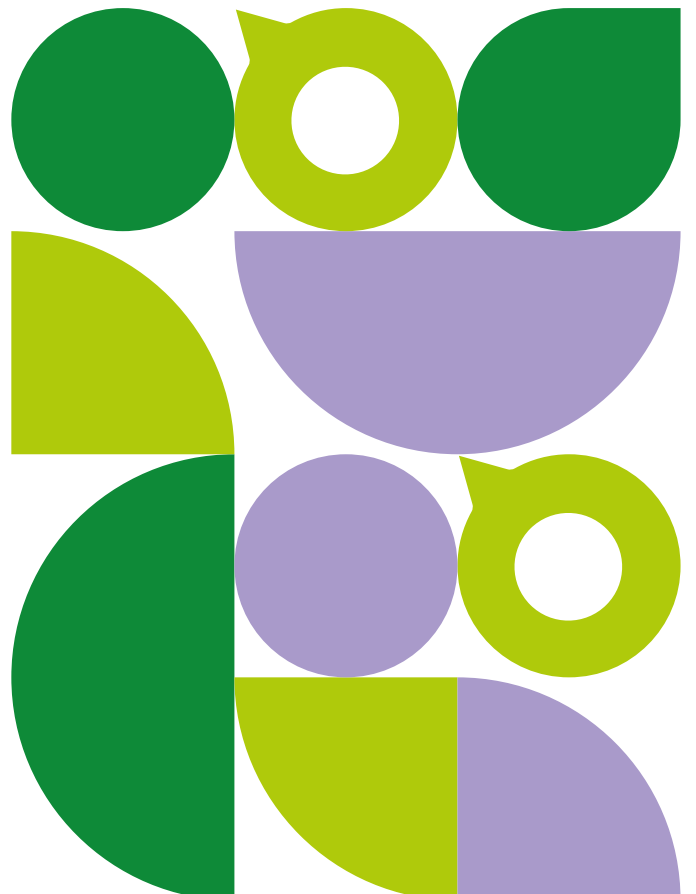
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