

National Guardian's Office

Annual Report

April 2024 – March 2025



Making Speaking Up business as usual



Government of the United Kingdom

National Guardian's Office

Annual Report April 2024 – March 2025

Presented to Parliament by the Parliamentary
Under-Secretary of State for Health Innovation and Safety
by Command of His Majesty

November 2025

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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 which could improve processes or make things 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 way for workers to speak up when they feel that they are unable to in other ways.

We conduct Speak Up reviews to identify learning and support improvement needs for 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

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.

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. Freedom to Speak Up guardians live the guardian values of courage, impartiality, empathy and learning.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/758062/government-response-to-gosport-independent-panel-report.pdf

Ministerial foreword

I present to Parliament the eighth National Guardian's Office Annual Report.

Time and again, investigations have shown that the NHS must improve in welcoming and listening to staff concerns. More than 1,300 Freedom to Speak Up guardians now play a crucial role in enabling staff to confidently raise issues that affect care quality, and I am pleased that this report provides an important insight into their valuable work.

Last year, cases raised with guardians rose yet further to over 38,000 – an 18.6 per cent rise on the number in 2023/24 and the highest number yet – highlighting the network's continuing and growing value. Particularly encouraging is that the percentage of those reporting detriment remains low and stable despite this increase, which suggests that progress is being made.

There is of course more to be done, and this report highlights that while most staff feel safer in raising concerns, a smaller proportion feel assured that their concerns will be acted upon. The Speak Up reviews conducted by the National Guardian's Office show that there remain barriers for some staff groups in speaking up.

The 10 Year Health Plan confirmed our intention to introduce professional standards for and regulation of NHS managers. This includes legislation in this parliament to disbar senior NHS leaders who have been dishonest or covered up unsafe practice from working in leadership roles in the NHS again. This will ensure managers are held professionally accountable for their work and decisions, just like their clinical colleagues.



Dr Zubir Ahmed MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State for Health Innovation
and Safety

As set out in the 10 Year Health Plan, whilst the distinct role of the National Guardian will no longer be required, our commitment to strengthen staff voices and promote openness and honesty in the NHS remains of paramount importance. I wish to personally express my gratitude to all Freedom to Speak Up guardians and those who support their work for the meaningful difference they are making across the healthcare system. This government is committed to enabling and supporting staff to speak up and to use it as a vehicle for the quality improvement and thereby the safety of NHS services.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to all who have contributed to the National Guardian's Office over the last ten years. This Annual Report is a testament to the valuable work you have undertaken to promote, support and empower our NHS workforce to be heard.

Foreword

Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark, National Guardian

It is a privilege to report on the work of the National Guardian's Office and Freedom to Speak Up guardians in this annual report.



Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark

National Guardian, National Guardian's Office



During 2024/25, the ability of workers to feel confident to speak up remained at the forefront of the news, with continued high-profile cases and the Thirwall Inquiry. It is imperative that improving workplace cultures is at the forefront of leaders and managers foci. Without an engaged workforce where workers are confident and able to raise concerns and suggest improvements, whose voices are valued and acted on, quality and safety of services are at risk.

The work of the National Guardian's Office continued at pace during the year.

Building confidence

The data for 2024/25 tells a remarkable story of growing trust in the Freedom to Speak Up system. Cases raised with guardians increased by 18.6 per cent to 38,158 – the highest number recorded since the programme began. We have seen that the reported rate of detriment for those speaking up has stayed stable at 2.9 per cent of cases, even with an increase in reporting. However, not all speaking up may report detriment and we have had reports of some guardians experiencing detriment for speaking up in their roles. No one should experience detriment for speaking up and more needs to be done across the system to ensure detriment is not tolerated and to remove the barrier of fear of consequences of speaking up.

New strategy

The formal approval of our new strategy by the Accountability and Liaison Board in May 2024 was a pivotal moment. It marked a shift from the ambition that workers feel 'safe to speak up' to one where workers feel 'confident to speak up'. This ambition set higher standards and raises expectations for the culture the National Guardian's Office seeks to create across the healthcare system. The strategy was launched in July 2024 and hopefully will move across with the expected transition of the core functions of the National Guardian's Office to NHS England in 2026.

Guardian development

A major achievement for 2024/25 was the completion of a comprehensive framework for the recruitment of guardians. This framework represents a significant step forward in professionalising and standardising the guardian role across the healthcare sector. Equally significant was the training and development programme for guardians. During 2024/25, with the support of the National Guardian's Office, a fifth of all guardians met their chosen mentor, 932 guardians completed refresher training sessions, and 497 new guardians completed their foundation training. I am pleased that the positive feedback (89.5 per cent of guardians reporting that e-learning effectively met stated aims) demonstrates the quality and relevance of the Office's support.

Detriment guidance

Detriment guidance was launched in January 2025. Developed in collaboration with Freedom to Speak Up networks, organisations and system leadership, it aims to reduce the incidents of detriment associated with having spoken up and remove fear of detriment. Published at the same time was an employment tribunals factsheet, informing guardians about how to respond when approached for information or attendance as a witness in connection with employment tribunal claims or similar proceedings.

Data transformation

The National Guardian's Office successfully integrated multiple data points into a unified platform through the new Guardian and Enquiries Management System, launched in March 2025. This significant technological advancement enables more effective analysis, generates deeper insights and provides stronger support for the national network of guardians.

Speak Up Reviews

Throughout 2024/25, the Office worked on a Speak Up Review about the experiences of overseas-trained workers. Data gave the Office grave concerns that the voice of this group of workers – critical to the NHS and patients – was not being listened to and even being silenced. The Listening and Learning report² was published in May 2025. Following up on the Listening to Workers³ (February 2023) review, NHS England held an independent review into the culture of ambulance trusts, which led to the establishment of a culture review delivery board, meeting for the first time in April 2025. We reported on progress among ambulance trusts in 2024/25. We found ambulance trusts had made significant progress implementing key recommendations, most trusts had mandated Freedom to Speak Up training for all staff, but it was clear there is still more work to be done.

In September 2024, we agreed to implement the Health Services Safety Investigation Body safety recommendation to identify the barriers that prevent temporary workers from speaking up. The review will be published by March 2026.

²https://nationalguardian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/NGO-Overseas-trained-workers-report_May-2025.pdf

³<https://nationalguardian.org.uk/case-review/speak-up-review-of-ambulance-trusts-in-england/>

Thirlwall inquiry

The National Guardian's Office submitted further evidence to the Thirlwall Inquiry in February 2025. It was an opportunity to raise again the limitations of influence the National Guardian's Office has due to its non-regulatory status. The development of the guardian recruitment framework is an important step for the Office and guardians. However, on its own it is not sufficient to ensure consistent implementation of the guardian role. We recommended that the Department of Health and Social research how the role is implemented.

Conclusion

This will be my final reflection on the office's achievements and the challenges that remain, as it was with great sadness I received the news of the abolition of the National Guardian's Office and my role as National Guardian. There is still so much to do.

The increased number of cases raised with guardians continues to demonstrate the value and importance of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role, as part of organisations' approaches to improving speak up culture. However, the decline in NHS Staff Survey confidence scores is a concern and reminds me that cultural change is complex and requires sustained, system-wide commitment.

My hope is that all leaders, managers and regulators will prioritise improving workplace culture and truly embed the principles and practices of Freedom to Speak Up – so that speaking up, listening up and following up truly become standard practice.

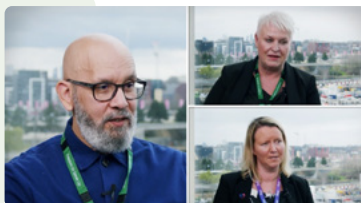
I extend my wholehearted gratitude to all Freedom to Speak Up guardians, whose courage and commitment are transforming workplace cultures across the NHS. To all workers who have had the courage to speak up and to the stakeholders and partners, who have championed Freedom to Speak Up – thank you for your confidence in this vital programme.

And to the National Guardian's Office team, past and present, thank you for all your commitment and hard work. Together, we have built something remarkable: a system where speaking up is increasingly viewed not as a risk, but as an essential component of high-quality, safe healthcare. I hope this legacy will endure, and our collective commitment to ensuring every worker feels confident to speak up will remain as strong as ever. It has been my privilege to serve as the last National Guardian.

Year at a glance

Summer 2024

- › We recorded the highest ever number of Speak Up cases - 38,158 - a 27.6 per cent increase on 2022/23.
- › We launched a video to help Freedom to Speak Up non-executive directors and trustees understand their role and remit.

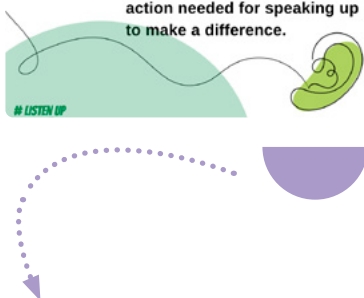


"It's brilliant. This film is going to make such a difference to guardians and non-executive directors."



#SPEAK UP MONTH 2024

Only by listening to understand can we take the action needed for speaking up to make a difference.



Autumn 2024

- › Equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging, guardian refresher training was held, aimed at reinforcing inclusive practices and supporting guardians in creating psychologically safe spaces.
- › Speak Up Month was held emphasising the importance of listening.

Winter 2024

- › Factsheet produced for guardians asked to attend or provide statements to employment tribunals.
- › Detriment guidance published to support guardians and those who have spoken up, to remove the barrier of fear of detriment that may prevent speaking up.
- › Chair and mentor development session held.



Summer 2025

- › NHS Staff Survey released showing a plateau in workers' confidence to speak up.
- › Annual conference held in London.

Chair's review

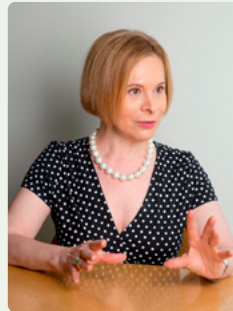
Suzanne McCarthy, Accountability and Liaison Board

The Accountability and Liaison Board provides strategic oversight and governance to the National Guardian's Office. I am privileged to be its chair. The board ensures the National Guardian's Office's compliance with statutory obligations, provides financial stewardship and offers strategic advice. Our responsibilities include endorsing business plans, monitoring performance, ensuring robust risk management and overseeing strategic implementation.

We receive Speak Up review reports, help to safeguard the wellbeing of the National Guardian's Office staff, and promote partnerships aligned with the organisation's values. The board's membership includes the National Guardian's Office's major stakeholders and funders – the Care Quality Commission, NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care.

During 2024/25, the board's focus remained on delivery of the National Guardian's Office's business plan objectives, while recognising increasing resource pressures exacerbated by the uncertainty over the outcome of the Dash Review and the Office's future. In January 2025, the board supported the scaling back of the National Guardian's Office's work programme to what was essential to deliver. During the year, the board considered several important initiatives and improvements. These included the publication of a revised five-year strategy, which shifted the focus from workers' feeling safe to speak up to workers feeling confident to do so. Other achievements included replacement of the IT system that guardians use when interacting with the National Guardian's Office. Several important documents were published including guidance on detriment, the employment tribunals factsheet and a review of progress across ambulance trusts in improving speaking up cultures. Work on a Speak Up Review into the experiences of overseas-trained workers was substantially completed during the year.

In May 2024, two guardians and a non-executive director Speak Up champion joined the board meeting to talk about their work. I addressed the National Guardian's Office annual conference and was able to thank guardians for their work and to speak with many of them.



Suzanne McCarthy

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

The board will continue to support the National Guardian's Office and its staff until its planned closure in March 2026. The board wants to ensure that the values and culture of speaking up continue to thrive across the healthcare landscape.

"As we approach the final period of the separate existence of the National Guardian's Office, I extend my heartfelt thanks to its staff and, most importantly, to the Freedom to Speak Up guardians themselves. The culture of confident speaking up that has been nurtured since the creation of the role of the National Guardian must endure. The board will work to ensure, as best we can, that the future of freedom to speak up will continue to be in safe hands."

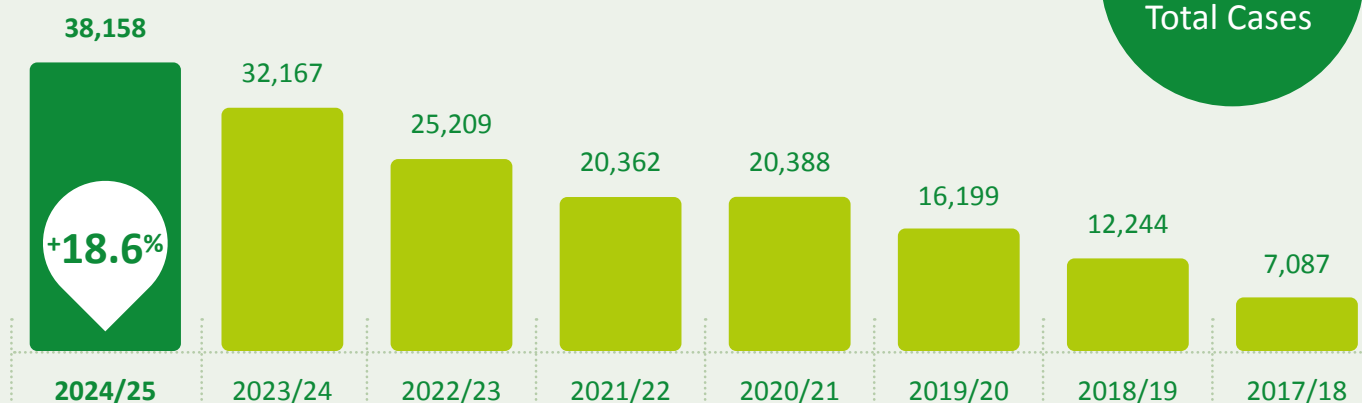


Speaking up in healthcare

During 2024/25, Freedom to Speak Up guardians handled more cases than ever before. This increase in speaking up is the result of guardians working to foster trust and break down barriers to speaking up. The National Guardian's Office thanks and applauds their efforts.

Speaking up to Freedom to Speak Up guardians

(38,158 cases were raised with Freedom to Speak Up guardians in 2024/25)



18.6%
Increase

38,158 cases - This is the highest number of cases ever recorded – an 18.6 per cent increase from 2023/24.

11.6%
Cases raised

The percentage of cases that were raised **anonymously** increased to **11.6 per cent**, up from 9.5 per cent in 2023/24.

2.9%
Indicated

Detriment for speaking up was indicated in **2.9 per cent** of cases, a decrease of 1.1 per cent.

79.9%
Speak up again

79.9 per cent of those who gave feedback said **they would speak up again**.

Case volumes, themes and trends

36.2%
Increase

Concerns related to **worker safety or wellbeing** increased by 36.2 per cent to 14,171 cases, representing 38.9 per cent of all cases raised.

1.5%
Decrease

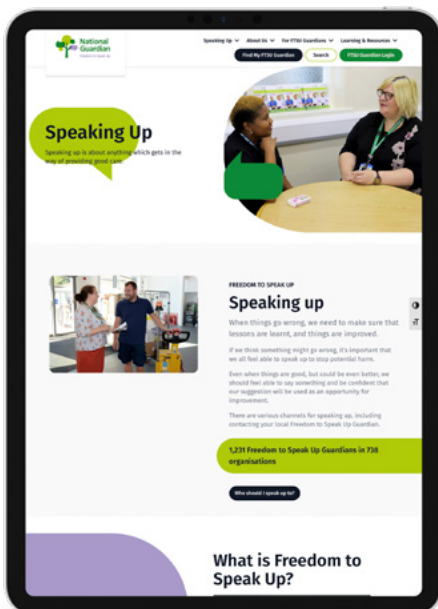
Bullying or harassment was a factor in 18.4 per cent of cases, representing a 1.5 per cent drop compared to 2023/24.

39.7%
Reported

Inappropriate behaviours and attitudes were the most commonly reported issue for the second consecutive year, featuring in 39.7 per cent of all cases.

17.8%
of cases

Concerns related to **patient safety or quality** comprised 17.8 per cent of cases in 2024/25.



Network growth

The National Guardian's Office supported the development of a Primary Care / Primary Medical Services Guardian Network and an Integrated Care Board Network in 2024/25. There are now 12 networks - seven regional ones and the five specialist networks - National Ambulance Network, Hospice Network, National Non-Provider Network, Primary Medical Services Network and the Integrated Care Board Network.

The networks are led by guardians who volunteer their time. The National Guardian's Office is grateful to the network chairs and all who support them in their valuable work.



Championing workers

Detriment guidance

In 2023/24, data submitted by Freedom to Speak Up guardians showed that around four per cent of workers believed they had experienced some form of detriment because they had spoken up. In 2024/25, eight per cent of support calls were associated with concerns involving detriment, although there was a drop in cases related to detriment as an outcome of speaking up.

Fear of detriment is a known barrier preventing workers from raising concerns. To tackle this barrier, the National Guardian's Office worked with Freedom to Speak Up guardians, Protect, and Andy Noble, Head of Speak Up at NatWest Group, to develop detriment guidance. The guidance has two aims: to ensure workers who have spoken up are supported and to remove the barriers of fear of detriment that may prevent speaking up.

The guidance was published in January 2025. A webinar was held in February 2025 with Simon Holbrook, Outreach Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, who was instrumental in the development of the guidance. It gave guardians the opportunity to discuss tackling detriment and supporting workers who may report facing detriment.

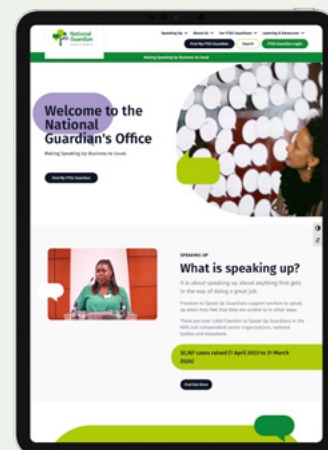
A factsheet about employment tribunals was published in January 2025. The factsheet explains what an industrial tribunal is, provides links to other sources of information, and answers some of the most frequent questions raised by guardians.



545,532
Visits

Visitors to our website

(535,995 in 2023/24)



+2%
Increase

-1%
Decrease

Find My Guardian page

193,929 views

(196,390 in 2023/24)



YouTube channel
25,271 views



LinkedIn followers
2,352 followers

Case study: Fostering a Speak Up culture at Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

In 2024, Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust took steps to embed a culture where workers feel psychologically safe and confident to raise concerns. It appointed its first full-time Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, Ashley Roper, ensuring speaking up is at the heart of the trust's commitment to inclusion, patient safety and staff wellbeing.

Workers can face barriers when raising concerns - from fear of making a situation worse to a lack of visible leadership support to raise issues. The trust implemented a wide-reaching programme to strengthen its Freedom to Speak Up culture through leadership, policy, education and peer support. This included:

- › **Recruitment and expansion:** appointment of the guardian in April 2024 who expanded the champion network, with targeted recruitment of medical staff to guardian roles
- › **Structured support and training:** development of a training programme for champions and guardians
- › **Leadership engagement:** regular thematic reporting to the chief executive, board and relevant committees
- › **Policy and cultural change:** refreshed the speaking up policy, creating a more engaging format, and introduced guidance on digital behaviours
- › **Awareness and education:** ran a trust-wide Speaking Up Month, hosted staff engagement events, delivered lunch-and-learn sessions and embedded Freedom to Speak Up into staff induction
- › **Improving communication:** focused on clear messaging about how to raise concerns, what to expect and how the trust responds.



Ashley Roper
Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

The initiative has seen positive shifts in both culture and measurable outcomes. There has been a 56 per cent increase in speaking up concerns since April 2024. The most improved NHS Staff Survey scores related to psychological safety and speaking up. Fewer than five per cent of respondents to the trust's speaking up survey reported any detriment after raising a concern. All survey respondents said their concern was treated confidentially.

Alex Whitfield, Chief Executive Officer, Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, said:

"The increased visibility of our Freedom to Speak Up team led by our full-time Guardian, Ashley, is really shifting the culture and building psychological safety. Colleagues can see that we want to know when they have concerns, and that we are serious about supporting all our colleagues to thrive and provide care they are proud of."



Speak Up Reviews

Overseas-trained workers' review

During 2024/25, the National Guardian's Office carried out a Speak Up Review to investigate the barriers that prevent overseas-trained workers from speaking up.

Overseas-trained workers are a large and growing portion of the healthcare workforce in England. They come from diverse countries and professions. Their ability to speak up confidently is important to patient care and safety.

Previous reviews and insights from other national bodies had raised concerns about this group of workers' confidence to speak up. The Speak Up Review was initiated to identify barriers specific to this group of workers, highlight examples of good and innovative practices, and make recommendations.

In addition to desktop research, insights from overseas-trained workers, guardians and senior healthcare leaders were gathered through surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

We engaged with:

850

Overseas-trained workers

150

Freedom to Speak Up guardians

14

System representatives and system leaders

Are you an overseas trained health worker working in the NHS?

Do you feel safe to speak up about concerns in your workplace?

Help the National Guardian's Office shed more light on your experiences by participating in our current Speak Up review

Find out how you can get involved at:
www.nationalguardian.org.uk



The review was published in May 2025 and made four recommendations:

1. Review and enhance the international recruitment guide and retention toolkit
2. Tailor Freedom to Speak Up arrangements to all workers
3. Improve data collection and categorisation of overseas-trained workers to better measure speaking up progress
4. Address cultural barriers.

The National Guardian's Office is grateful to the many individuals and organisations that shared their time with the research team.





Impact of ambulance Speak Up Review

In 2023, the National Guardian's Office published *Listening to Workers*⁴, a Speak Up Review of the culture in NHS ambulance trusts in England. The review found the culture in ambulance trusts did not support workers to speak up and this was having a negative impact on worker wellbeing and patient safety. The review called for an independent review of the culture in ambulance trusts, which NHS England commissioned. It reported in February 2024.

As part of the National Guardian's Office's commitment to ambulance trusts, we conducted a progress report, assessing them against the Speak Up Review's recommendations. Progress was evident but implementation of the recommendations was variable. The National Guardian's Office pledged to work with the Culture Review Delivery Board to push forward much-needed transformation of ambulance trust cultures.

Temporary workers' Speak Up Review

In September 2024, the Health Services Safety Investigations Body asked the National Guardian's Office to identify the barriers that prevent temporary staff from speaking up and develop mechanisms to address those barriers. This programme builds on previous Speak Up reviews that have explored barriers to speaking up.

The temporary workers Speak Up Review will be completed by March 2026.



Are you a nurse or midwife in a temporary role?

Do you feel safe to speak up about concerns at work?

⁴<https://nationalguardian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Listening-to-Workers-Speak-Up-Review-of-Ambulance-Trusts.pdf>

Listening to workers

NHS Staff Survey results

In the 2024 NHS Staff Survey, the Freedom to Speak Up sub-score remained virtually unchanged from 2023, 6.45 compared to 6.46. The results suggest challenges persist, creating an urgent need for renewed focus on creating cultures where staff concerns translate into meaningful action.

The 2024 survey showed areas where attitudes and experiences of speaking up had improved. But it also highlighted a stalling in workers' confidence.

Improvements included:

- › Ambulance trusts demonstrated gains following a sector-wide review and targeted interventions
- › Minority ethnic staff showed increased confidence that organisations would act if they raised concerns
- › Internationally recruited workers reported higher trust in organisational responses than workers recruited in the UK.

Concerns included:

- › Wider healthcare team workers' trust in their organisations acting if they raised concerns, fell from 2023 levels
- › Long-term workers reported lower confidence compared to newer employees
- › White staff demonstrated consistent decline in trust regarding organisational responsiveness.

The survey found that seven out of ten workers (71.5 per cent) felt safe raising concerns about unsafe clinical practices, but only just over half (56.8 per cent) believed their organisation would act on patient safety concerns. Just one in two (49.5 per cent) workers trusted their organisation to act on concerns more generally, despite nearly two in three (61.8 per cent) feeling safe to raise them. This 'action gap' represents a critical barrier to sustainable improvement. A speak up culture without action risks creating disillusionment, distrust and disengagement. The disconnect between feeling safe to raise concerns and trusting that organisations will respond effectively undermines the entire speaking up framework.

Following the survey, the National Guardian's Office made recommendations to address three priority areas:

1. Embedding a culture of listening and action

- › Organisations must implement clear, standardised processes ensuring concerns receive appropriate attention
- › Leaders need training that focuses on effective response skills
- › At a national level, there is a need to establish system-wide accountability mechanisms across all healthcare bodies.

2. Strengthening accountability frameworks

- › A system must exist that holds leaders directly responsible for fostering safe speaking up environments
- › Organisations must be accountable for how they handle concerns
- › There must be clear consequences for inaction or inadequate responses
- › The National Guardian's Office supports proposed reforms including NHS manager regulation and legal duties to investigate concerns.

3. Standardising the Guardian role

- › Guardians must have adequate time and resources to deliver on their role
- › The impartiality of a guardian must be safeguarded, regardless of the employment model.

Without a culture where concerns are heard and acted upon, risks go unnoticed and harm can follow. We need sustained commitment from government, regulators, healthcare leaders and all stakeholders to transform speaking up from a compliance exercise into a genuine driver of safety and improvement.

The evidence is clear- workers will continue speaking up only if they see their concerns lead to meaningful change. The healthcare system's response to this challenge will determine whether speaking up culture advances or retreats in the coming years.

Case study: Helping staff raise concerns in the Black Country

Prior to setting up a new Freedom to Speak Up portal and dashboard on the Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's intranet, all concerns had been stored on a password-protected spreadsheet. The portal uses simple language and a straightforward interface that enables workers to raise concerns confidentially, as well as anonymously, if they wish. The portal is more secure than a spreadsheet, is fully GDPR compliant and allows the guardians to store more data. It is now in its sixth year and has made reporting and analysis easier.

Roger Bishton and Amina Begum, Freedom to Speak Up guardians at the trust, said:

“As guardians, we recognise that speaking up can sometimes come with challenges and this is just one way of trying to make it easier for staff in the trust. If workers ever need to raise a concern, we'd encourage them to give it a try. If it affects you, it could affect all of us, telling us about it can make a real difference.”

Dr Madhava Rao, Interim Chief Medical Officer and Executive Lead for Freedom to Speak Up, said:

“Creating a culture where workers feel safe to raise concerns is a key priority at Black Country Healthcare. Our portal and dashboard help to make it easier for colleagues to reach our guardians securely, removing a key obstacle to speaking up.”



Roger Bishton

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian



Dr Madhava Rao

Interim Chief Medical Officer
and Executive Lead for
Freedom to Speak Up

Amina Begum

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

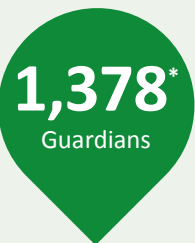
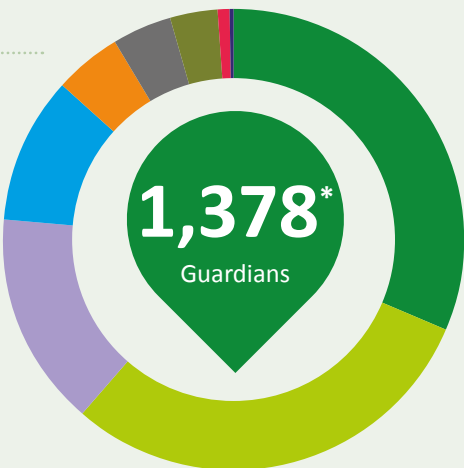


Freedom to Speak Up guardians

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role is complex and the landscape in which guardians operate is constantly evolving. The guardian network has grown from just 200 guardians in NHS trusts in 2017 to more than 1,300 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 2025)

NHS Trust/Foundation Trusts.....	437
Independent.....	418
Primary care	208
Hospice.....	141
Integrated Care Boards.....	65
National Bodies	59
Other	45
Social Care	14
Professional Body.....	1



Actively serving in various organisations



New guardians were successfully onboarded



Guardians stepped down



Organisations were registered with the National Guardian’s Office



Refresher training sessions were undertaken by guardians with more than two years’ experience, reinforcing continued professional development.

*Please note that some guardians support more than one organisation.

Mentor conversations

From April 2024 to March 2025, there were 287 reflective conversations with a trained guardian mentor (total 34 mentors). Quarterly mentor meetings are 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. For new guardians, the conversations help them reflect if they have the correct support in place from their organisation to meet the role's expectations.

Support calls

Support in the role43%
Case support.....35%
Detriment8%
Others.....14%



- › The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Support and Policy Team handled a total of 150 support calls
- › 43 per cent of support calls were from guardians seeking support in their role. Themes included lack of organisational leadership support and lack of ringfenced time or resource
- › 35 per cent of support calls related to support with specific cases being managed by guardians
- › 8 per cent of support calls were associated with concerns involving detriment
- › The remaining 14 per cent of support calls addressed a range of other support needs, such as clarity on the guardian role, data and wellbeing.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network meetings

Members of the National Guardian's Office attended 45 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network meetings between April 2024 and March 2025. As well as the regional and national networks, this figure includes quarterly meetings with mentors and network chairs. An in-person chair and mentor development session was held in February 2025.

*Please note, the numbers above are only for those workers who have completed the training via the NHSE platform and does not take into account those organisations who have embedded the training into their own Learning Management System.

Training

61,655

Completed

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

43,419*

Completed Speak Up – aimed at all workers including volunteers, students, and those in training.

11,365*

Completed Listen Up – aimed at all line and middle managers.

6,871*

Completed Follow Up – aimed at all senior leaders including executive board members and non-executive directors.

Refresher training

932 guardians completed refresher training 2024/25. 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 reference 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.

E-learning feedback

- › 89.5 per cent of Freedom to Speak Up guardians reported that the e-learning effectively met its stated aims and objectives
- › 86 per cent of participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of course materials and resources provided
- › On average, 88.4 per cent of responses indicated that the e-learning content supported meaningful reflection, learning and professional stimulation.

Speak Up Month

The theme for the 2024 Speak Up Month campaign was Listening.

The choice was prompted by analysis of the NHS Staff Survey and the National Guardian's Office's commitment to improve listening up across the NHS. It was the seventh Speak Up Month the National Guardian's Office has coordinated.

The objectives of Speak Up Month 2024 were to:

- › Support guardians to raise awareness of Freedom to Speak Up.
- › Address the barriers of fear and futility.
- › Highlight the part each worker plays in tackling barriers to speaking up when they listen to colleagues raising concerns; and the part managers and leaders play in fostering an inclusive environment that encourages speaking up, listening up and following up.
- › Highlight the missing voices and encourage leaders at all levels to be curious and listen to the silence.
- › Increase the visibility of the guardian network and the National Guardian's Office, and promote participation in Speak Up Month initiatives
- › Bring together stakeholders who can reflect on how they listen to workers and use their influence to improve the listening of organisations.

A suite of assets was created to support guardians to organise events in their organisations. Partners recorded videos and wrote blogs sharing their perspectives on the need to Listen Up. There was the traditional Wear Green Wednesday.

SPEAK UP MONTH 2024

Listening plays an important part in encouraging people to feel confident to speak up



During the month, staff at the National Guardian's Office supported national and local events. The National Guardian Jayne Chidgey-Clark took part in a webinar

with Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, spoke at a Freedom to Speak Up leadership conference for Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust & Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust, took part in NHS Frimley Integrated Care Board's virtual speak up event, gave a talk for a professional nurse advocate event in the Midlands, spoke at Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust's leadership event and spoke at the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust Freedom to Speak Up conference.

Charlie Cassell, Director of Operations and Strategy, and Jenni Fellows, Senior Support and Engagement Manager, took part in Cygnet's second annual Freedom to Speak Up event. Jenni was a keynote speaker and her focus was fear and futility and how to address those barriers to speaking up. Charlie also took part in a civil service event on best practice in speaking up.

National Lead for Guardian Support and Policy, Bethany Carter, spoke at the Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's virtual Freedom to Speak Up conference: Elevating Voices: Do you hear to listen; are you here to listen? She also joined South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust's conference, Avoiding distractions when listening, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust's Speak Up Roadshow, NHS Blood and Transport's Speaking Up Safely event, was a panellist for Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board's webinar Speaking Up Against Discrimination, and gave a joint talk with Sally Khawaja, Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, at the Dental Show.

Case study: Collaborative events across Nottinghamshire

For Speak Up Month 2024, Freedom to Speak Up guardians across the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire integrated care system worked together to bring their networks closer. They hosted four sessions throughout Speak Up Month, each focusing on a different theme and involving champions and executive members. All sessions were recorded to allow those unable to attend to view the content later.

The sessions featured:

- › A podcast-style discussion, led by Georgina Coop, Organisational Development Specialist from Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, and Clare Holman, Organisational Development Specialist from Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, on safety in speaking up.
- › Guardians from the city and county hosted a session on barriers to speaking up.
- › Guardians from three provider organisations hosted a session for champions to reflect on their roles, express their support for colleagues, and share their personal experiences of speaking up.
- › Board members from provider organisations spoke about their own personal experiences of speaking up and listening.

Gilbert George, Director of Corporate Governance and Executive Lead for Freedom to Speak Up: “We’re proud to reflect on a successful Freedom to Speak Up Month 2024 at Nottingham University Hospitals. Throughout October, we engaged with staff across the organisation to promote a culture of openness, safety, and support.

Gilbert George

Director of Corporate Governance and Executive Lead for Freedom to Speak Up

“Thanks to everyone who got involved, whether by attending events, sharing stories, or simply starting a conversation. Your voice matters, and together we’re continuing to build a workplace where everyone feels safe to speak up.

“We look forward to 2025 being an even bigger success.”



Networks and leadership

Developing leaders

The National Guardian's Office hosted an in-person development event in February 2025 designed to celebrate the efforts of the chairs and vice-chairs of the 12 guardian networks and the 45 guardian mentors. The agenda was curated to provide space for reflection, peer learning and inspiration. Sessions included communicating with impact and aspirations for the future of the guardian network. The event fostered a strong sense of community and collaboration, reinforcing the importance of these roles in creating safe and supportive environments. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. Building on the success of this development day, the National Guardian's Office has arranged another in-person event in October 2025, continuing the Office's commitment to support and celebrate the guardian network.

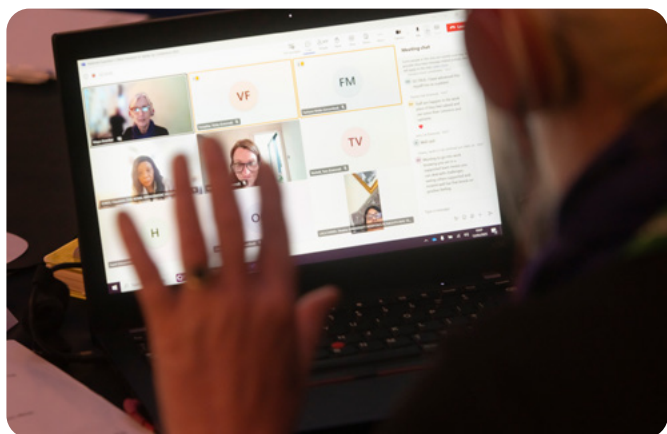


Film for Freedom to Speak Up non-executive directors and trustees

Non-executive directors and trustees for Freedom to Speak Up play a vital role supporting guardians and championing Freedom to Speak Up at board level within their organisations. To better support these leaders, the National Guardian's Office developed a short film that helps them understand their remit, promotes their role and sets up positive working relationships.

The film was launched in July 2024. It features two NHS trust non-executive directors- Karen Walker, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and Nicholas Campbell-Watts, King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust- and Freedom to Speak Up trustee Victoria Webb from Ashgate Hospice. They share their insights into their role and tips on being effective. The film has proved an excellent tool for new and existing Freedom to Speak Up non-executive directors and trustees. The National Guardian's Office is grateful to those who took part in the filming.

"Very grateful for it and I have come back to work today feeling energised and more confident – thank you."



"It's brilliant! This film is going to make such a difference to guardians and non-executive directors."

Board development sessions

As part of our work to improve workplace culture, the National Guardian's Office offers support and guidance to organisational leaders. A total of 13 board development sessions were delivered in 2024/25 for organisations including ambulance and acute trusts.

The National Guardian's Office delivered sessions for the boards of University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust, Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, North East Ambulance Service, South West Ambulance Service and London Ambulance Service.

Development sessions are designed to improve governance, compliance, accountability, teamwork, and clarify roles and responsibilities. Sessions are offered to organisations with low scores in the Speak Up section of the NHS Staff Survey, when requested by an organisation or if the need is identified during support calls with guardians. The sessions were led by the National Guardian or a member of the leadership team.

"Thank you for yesterday's board development session and also for creating a safe space in which colleagues were able to speak honestly and vulnerably in terms of potential barriers." Chief People Officer

"Thank you for the session. It left us with a few uncomfortable truths but importantly some key pointers as to how we can continue our cultural journey. I am glad that you sensed the determination of the board to address the issues we face." Chair of Board



Partnership working

The Partnership Working Group brings together NHS England, Department of Health and Social Care, Care Quality Commission and National Guardian's Office to discuss issues around Freedom to Speak Up.

Topics discussed by the group included:

- › The possibility of the National Guardian's Office being part of the induction process for new Care Quality Commission staff
- › The National Guardian's Office's response to the Thirlwall Inquiry
- › Joint work between the National Guardian's Office and NHS England on escalation routes for workers
- › The National Guardian's Office's new IT system- the contract with the existing supplier ended in November 2024 and the Office procured a provider to replace the system
- › A submission by the National Guardian's Office to the Health and Social Care Select Committee's inquiry into NHS leadership, performance and patient safety
- › Evolving the Partnership Working Group from sharing and discussing issues to a forum to discuss policies and drive issues.



Case study: Speaking up among medical and dental staff in Yorkshire

Stefanie Greenwood, Freedom to Speak Up Guardian at York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, works in partnership with Marie Butterfield, Industrial Relations Officer at BMA Yorkshire and North East to promote the guardians' work and address the barriers to speaking up.

Stefanie says: "During routine evaluation of the Freedom to Speak Up service, I noticed low and inconsistent engagement from medical staff. Through walk-arounds and informal conversations, it became clear that many medics feared reputational damage, career limitations and visas/sponsorship issues if they raised concerns.

"When medical professionals do not feel safe or empowered to speak up, it can compromise patient safety, erode psychological safety, normalise poor clinical practice, lead to avoidable patient harms, create toxic workplace culture and result in missed learning opportunities, leading to litigation.

"To address this, I contacted trade union partners at the BMA to build stronger links. Together, we promoted the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role's independence, impartiality and confidentiality, shared thematic data to triangulate staff experiences, co-developed reassuring messaging about available support, and embedded Freedom to Speak Up awareness in union-led communications and meetings.

"The partnership led to increased visibility among medical staff and other professional groups. Union representatives are now active allies promoting the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, psychological safety and speaking up, as well as leadership listening up. The collaboration helped de-personalise concerns and frame them as systemic issues, reducing fear of individual exposure."

Marie says: "Our collaboration is a great example of working together to increase the visibility of the Freedom to Speak Up role among groups that might be difficult to reach, especially the resident doctor group who rotate through various NHS trusts."



Stefanie Greenwood
Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

Marie Butterfield
Industrial Relations Officer

The partnership increased the number of medics contacting the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian by 83% between 2021/22 and 2024/25, suggesting growing awareness and trust in the service.

Lorraine Boyd, Non-Executive Director, Senior Independent Director and Maternity Safety Champion at York and Scarborough, said: "Having the confidence to speak up throughout our workforce is a valuable strand of our quality and safety strategy and the unique perspective that our clinical colleagues can give is a really important contribution that should not be missed. The work undertaken by the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian to address and overcome the barriers felt by these groups is making a real difference."

Learning from others

Annual conference 2025 highlights

The National Guardian's Office's annual conference in March 2025 in London attracted the highest number of registrations of any annual conference. There were 191 delegates at the venue, with another 518 online. The conference focus was 'Speaking Up – changing organisational culture'. The theme was influenced by feedback from guardians who highlight consistently high levels of bullying and harassment being reported to them.

The conference was opened by Suzanne McCarthy, Independent Chair of the National Guardian's Office Accountability and Liaison Board. Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health, Baroness Merron addressed delegates via a pre-recorded video to thank them for their work promoting speaking up.

There were two panel sessions, each focusing on different aspects of organisational culture- why good teams matter in healthcare and how to build an open and honest reporting culture. Capt Emma Henderson MBE airline captain, founder of the charity Project Wingman & CEO, Julie Rogers, Chief Executive, Healthcare People Management Association, Dr Natalie Sanford, Faculty Lead for Interprofessional Education at King's College London, and Dr Kathryn Perera, Senior Consultant Leadership and Organisational Development, King's Fund discussed how to build good teams.

Professor Mary Dixon-Woods, Director of THIS Institute and The Health Foundation Professor of Healthcare Improvement Studies at the University of Cambridge sent a video sharing her research on culture and speaking up.

The afternoon session, How to build an open and honest reporting culture, was introduced by Sir Julian Hartley, Chief Executive of Care Quality Commission via video. The panellists were Scott Stevenson, Director of Strategy, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, Owen Chinembiri, Assistant Director: Workforce, NHS Race and Health Observatory and Naomi Assame Deputy Director of Safety and Learning, NHS Resolution.

Delegates worked in small groups and with one another online in two workshop-style sessions. Jude Diggins, Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, Hampshire Isle of Wight Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust introduced the morning session where delegates considered if civility saves lives. In the afternoon, guardians discussed and developed ideas about how to overcome barriers to speaking up for workers with protected characteristics and temporary workers.

A total of 60 per cent of delegates who gave feedback said the conference met or exceeded their expectations. Around two-thirds said they could use the information they learnt on the day immediately. And nearly all who offered feedback said they would recommend the annual conference to a new guardian.

"The topics were relevant to challenges I face and related to most of my cases."



“I feel inspired to continue as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian as today confirmed my renewed belief in its importance in underpinning culture.”



Governance

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

Accountability and Liaison Board members for 2024/25

- › **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, Care Quality Commission
- › **Chris Dzikiti** – Interim Executive Director for Operations and Executive Lead for Mental Health, Care Quality Commission.

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 and how it has responded to those disclosures. See the Prescribed Persons Annual Report 2024/25⁵.

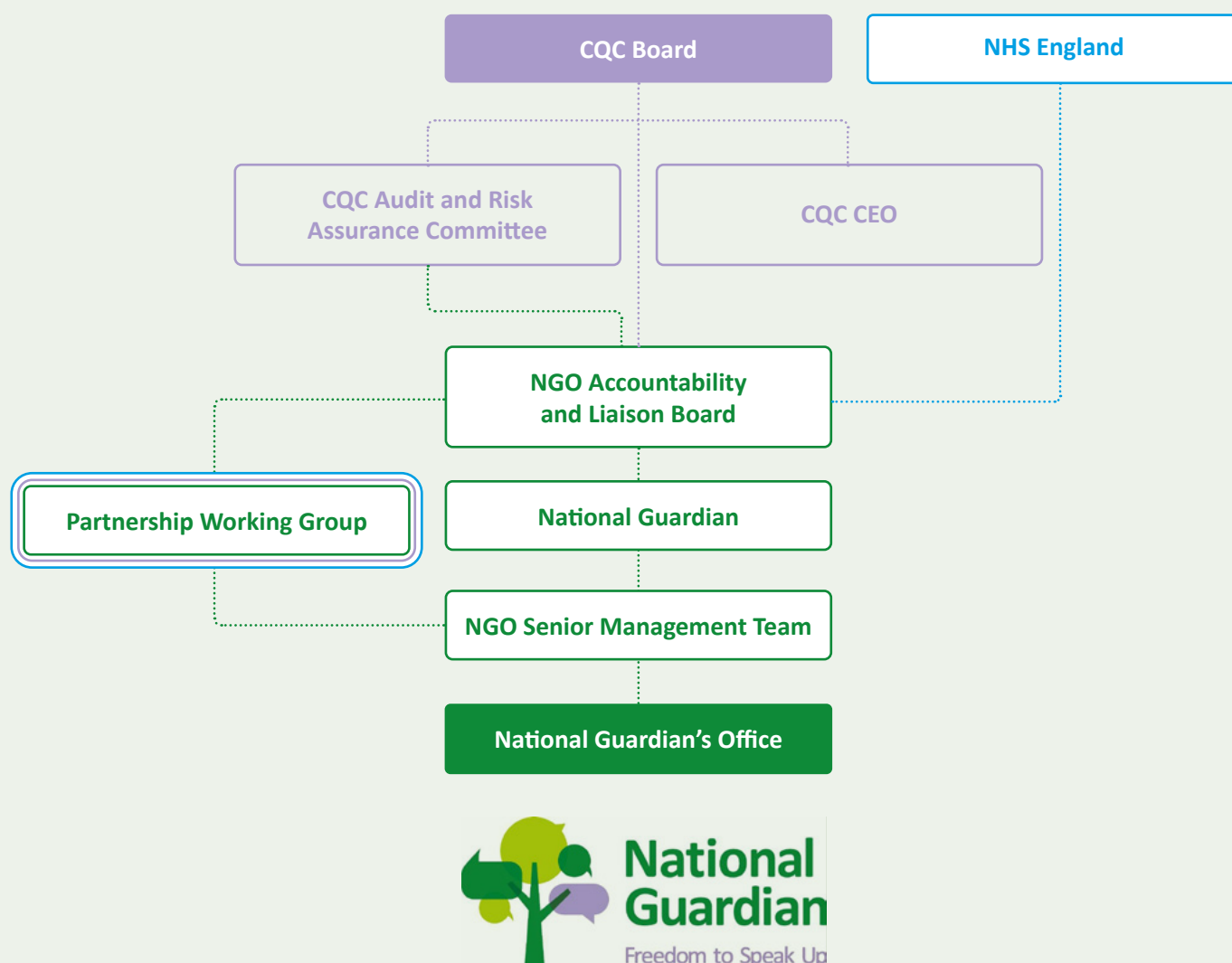
Enquiries to the National Guardian's Office

In 2024/25, the number of enquiries to the National Guardian's Office was 3,692. Of these, 58 per cent were responded to on the same day and a further 32 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.

⁵<https://www.fca.org.uk/data/prescribed-persons-annual-report-2024-25>

Structure

The National Guardian for the NHS is supported by a team consisting of 13 staff at 31 March 2025.





National Guardian

Freedom to Speak Up

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

Our offices are located at
2 Redman Place, Stratford, London, E20 1JQ

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National Guardian's Office

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