



The Future of Freedom to Speak Up

Summary

[NHS England has set out proposals for the future of Freedom to Speak Up](#) after the National Guardian's Office closes in June 2026.

This written submission is based on a survey conducted by Gowpen of Freedom to Speak Up guardians, asking about their wellbeing and support.

Supportive of the outcomes outlined in the engagement pack of the importance of high quality training and effective support for Freedom to Speak Up guardians, this submission shares reflections on the need for greater emotional support of guardians.

Guardians provide a unique opportunity for organisations to learn and improve, and for workers to feel supported in raising anything which impacts on their job or the quality of care.

Support for the wellbeing of Freedom to Speak Up guardians

The data from our wellbeing survey reveals a gap between the recommendation that guardians are supported and the lived reality of Freedom to Speak Up guardians. While guardians remain deeply passionate and say they feel "privileged" to do the work, for many there is a sense of exhaustion and disillusionment regarding institutional accountability.

They frequently describe their role as "lonely" and "vulnerable,"

Recommendations from the results of our survey

- 1. Provide external supervision:** Freedom to Speak Up guardians require specialised role specific supervision to support their wellbeing. Internal management check-ins and Employee Assistance Programmes provide neither the independence, nor the psychological safety essential for guardian support.
- 2. In the absence of a national office, there still needs to be a National Professional Framework for Freedom to Speak Up guardians.** This framework should include include a code of ethics, professional registration, accredited training, and wellbeing support to reflect the role's independence and sensitivity. An independent professional framework would also provide trust in the role for workers.

- 3. Strengthening peer support with funding** . A professional framework would give Freedom to Speak Up guardians the ability to organise and share support and learning nationally. However, funding is needed to support volunteers in the regional and sector networks

In addition, but outside the scope of the consultation, the results from our survey also reflect guardians' vulnerability, and the impact on their wellbeing caused by managers and leaders who do not have sufficient knowledge or training of Freedom to Speak Up or the role of the guardian.

The implementation of the [Management and Leadership Framework](#) must include a mechanism where leaders who silence or victimise guardians are held to account.

There needs to be further investment in the education piece for leadership, including the role of guardians and the role leaders have in listening and taking action. This must be embedded within any manager and leadership training programme and oversight.

I feel that senior leadership would very much rather Freedom to Speak Up go away. Whilst the right words are said this isn't followed up in action or in quality and timely responses

Gowpen survey respondent

Forward thinking

The NHS Staff Survey consistently shows that support for speaking up is inconsistent across NHS providers. Handing over responsibility to individual employers for such a nuanced role (which guardians themselves say some of their leaders do not understand sufficiently) seems counter intuitive.

This is a critical point in the development of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role. Ten years since its inception, it remains essential that guardians are recognised for the unique skill-set they bring and the challenges they face in maintaining their wellbeing and personal development.

The value of the role for workers, patients and the NHS is not just how guardians handle concerns, but their ability to transform issues into wider learning, both for the organisation and the wider NHS community.

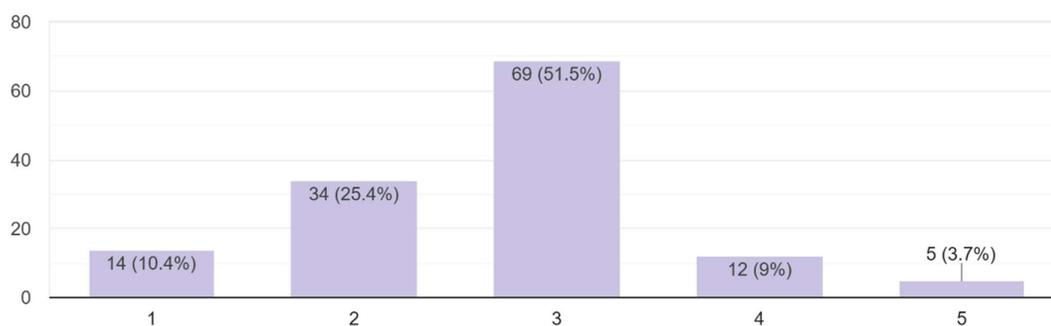
Speaking up in the NHS is a national issue and as such requires a national network in response. Supporting the continuation of the national aspect of the guardian network will help its evolution into a professional network, sharing successful practices and support across the regions, including a national conference.

The emotional labour of Freedom to Speak Up guardians

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role is both rewarding and challenging. It attracts passionate people who love the NHS and want to make the working environment a safe one for colleagues and patients.

In our survey of guardians, when asked how their role affects their wellbeing, the majority (51%) give a neutral response. However 1 in 3 give a less than neutral response (a rating of 1 or 2).

In the last 12 months, do you feel that your Freedom to Speak Up role has affected your wellbeing where 1) is negative impact 3) is neither positive or...gative and 5) is positively affecting your wellbeing
134 responses



This reflects the [National Guardian’s Office latest guardian survey](#) which said that 22% of guardians often or always felt emotionally exhausted by the role, and 13% often or always felt burnt out.

Themes from guardians who responded negatively (either scoring 1 or 2)

- Emotional exhaustion** Guardians describe feeling “powerless,” “burnt out,” and “unheard.”
“I have felt very unsupported and do not feel anyone has my back. It has led to stomach issues and loss of sleep.”
- Lack of support or resources:** Comments often cite poor organisational response, lack of support from line managers or senior leadership, lack of time, and feeling isolated or alone in the role.
“Not enough hours allocated to the resource, often don't feel safe employment wise when raising concerns relating to senior level, grade is too low for the significance of the role.”

- **Exposure to distressing cases:** Guardians report dealing with traumatic or triggering cases, including violence, sexual abuse, and global issues (e.g., the Gaza conflict and the institutional response), which can be overwhelming.
- **Organisational inaction:** Frustration arises when concerns are not acted upon, leading to feelings of helplessness and negative impact on wellbeing.
“Feeling powerless. That people have suffered due to speaking up. Feel I am to blame.”

In contrast, guardians who responded positively talked about

- **Strong supportive environment and recognition:** Guardians who rate their wellbeing as positive tend to say they feel supported by leadership and colleagues, and their work is valued.
“Recognised, appreciated and supported by the senior leadership.”
- **Sense of purpose:** Making a difference and seeing positive outcomes for people who speak up is rewarding.
- **Access to resources:** Availability of supervision and wellbeing services, helps them to maintain work/home balance and gives feelings of autonomy over their workload.
“Monthly clinical/psychological supervision, flexible working, trusted to do my role, positive feedback and praise.”

Summary of observations from our survey

- **Support is critical:** Across all responses, the presence or absence of support, whether from leadership, peers, or wellbeing services, directly correlates with wellbeing outcomes for Freedom to Speak Up guardians.
- **Isolation and emotional burden:** Negative responses are strongly linked to feelings of isolation and exposure to distressing cases.
- **Resilience strategies:** Guardians employ a range of coping mechanisms, including exercise, hobbies, family time, and peer support, to maintain their emotional resilience.
- **Recognition and validation:** Feeling valued and receiving positive feedback are recurring themes among those with neutral or positive ratings.

Wellbeing support for guardians

“The mental/emotional weight of the issues that are brought forward can be quite intense. There's only me and one other Guardian in the trust and we don't have any psychological supervision.”

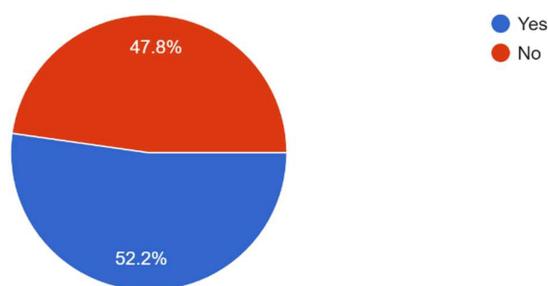
Gowpen survey respondent

The engagement pack asks: *“How can we ensure support remains confidential, impartial and independent?”* The pack combines technical support in the execution of the role (i.e. complex cases, escalation routes) with emotional support.

Emotional support is a fundamental element for the wellbeing of Freedom to Speak Up guardians. Data from our survey shows that **48% of guardians have no access to confidential supervision**.

Do you have access to confidential psychological supervision?

134 responses



Access to psychological support varies widely by sector, and there is no clear pattern as to whether higher CQC ratings guarantee better access to psychological support. Even among ‘Excellent’ and ‘Good’ rated organisations, a substantial proportion of respondents report not having access.

Of those for whom it is available, 45% say they have accessed the psychological support in the last twelve months. One guardian commented:

“I have good access to internal psychological support through an EAP and clinical Psychology team - however sometimes it would be good to have access to an external service as when I speak to the internal team it invariably ends up discussing workplace issues and the wider picture = so less about my needs and wellbeing. I think it's vital that PAM assist from the NGO or something similar is made available after the NGO closure.”

Gowpen survey respondent

Another highlighted the specialised needs of guardians, and that standard employee assistance programmes (EAP) do not have the knowledge or insight to support appropriately:

“Psychological support can be accessed via EAP but guardians need more tailored Freedom to Speak Up psychological supervision.”

Gowpen survey respondent

Responses also indicate that face-to-face meetings with managers may be being used as a substitute for true supervision.

“My wellbeing is not being supported in the role - you ask over and over for supervision and it's never really given, just face to face meetings with your manager, not an independent person.”

Gowpen survey respondent

Confidentiality and Guardian independence cannot be maintained if the support structure remains internal to the employer’s management hierarchy.

Passion fatigue

“It’s hard to balance passion and resilience. I need to keep checking how my passion is serving me, Freedom to Speak Up, my teams, [service users] and patients, and [the organisation]”

Gowpen survey respondent

In the absence of consistent support – both situational and psychological – guardians are employing a range of coping mechanisms to sustain their resilience.

Meaning-based resilience

Many respondents are sustained by their passion for making a difference. When asked what supports their wellbeing, many respondents are "filled up" by the success of the people they help.

However, if outcomes are poor, this source of resilience disappears. Although having a clear sense of purpose and meaning in work has significant benefits for people’s wellbeing, there can be a dark side to having a role you are passionate about, especially one with a high degree of emotional labour. Responses to our survey included red flags for burnout (for example, feeling "guilty" for taking time away, health issues, sleep problems).

If Freedom to Speak Up Guardian wellbeing is outcome-dependent and their organisation is unsupportive or not listening, this primary source of resilience easily turns into a source of burnout for Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

Recommendation: **Mandatory external psychological coaching/supervision** for all Freedom to Speak Up guardians to relieve the emotional burden identified by

practitioners.

This will acknowledge the complex nature of the role and its potential to impact on wellbeing. This must be independent of providers and regulators to maintain confidentiality and to meet the needs of guardians.

Guardian training

The engagement pack asks: “*What further training or development would be beneficial for guardians?*”

The [Guardian Development Guide](#), while offering a useful framework for the competencies and qualities needed for the guardian role, does not (nor can it) fully equate to the learning and development required for a role which reflects the changing needs of the workforce.

For example, guardians are increasingly dealing with cases linked to global and political conflict (e.g., race, discrimination, international crises) where they feel "overwhelmed" and "untrained." New legislation, such as the Worker Protection Act and the incoming Employment Rights Act, has seen them supporting more colleagues who have, for example, experienced sexual harassment, or issues for those fall under the Act (such as agency workers).

Freedom to Speak Up guardians, by the very nature of their role, handle cases which reflect the challenges being experienced by society.

As one guardian said

“My Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role is intense and my wellbeing is affected positively most of the time at work, however the global issues and responses to genocide and oppression at my institution demonstrates that a great team can become less safe when power and leadership are influenced by the fear of being labelled antisemitic when this is not happening at all. ... The growth in racism, islamophobia and sexual assaults are being dealt with poorly. ... As a guardian I have been overwhelmed by cases linked to serious concerns regarding these topics over the last 20 months where there has been no genuine support that has helped me with the impact of this.”

Gowpen survey respondent

Foundation training alone is insufficient to support guardians in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment. Training must be accredited and linked to a professional registration to ensure that guardians are working safely and that the role is given the respect it deserves.

Regularly updated CPD opportunities must be made easily available. These opportunities must reflect the challenges which guardians experience and supporting

them in handling politically sensitive cases, and supporting their own wellbeing in doing so.

The National Guardian's Office provided an annual national conference, to share successful practices and connect and monthly lunch and learn sessions provided a continuous menu of CPD opportunities, alongside the annual refresher training.

Recommendation: A National Professional Framework for Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

A National Professional Framework would provide details of accredited CPD which would evolve in keeping with the training needs of guardians and the workers they support. Linked to professional registration and a code of ethics it would reflect the role's independence and sensitivity. An independent professional framework would also provide trust in the role for workers.

Peer support for guardians

Alongside a mix of personal boundaries and self-care "reboots" (holidays, nature, exercise), guardians mention **peer validation** as a key source of support.

In a role where they cite feeling isolated and lonely as one of their key challenges to their emotional wellbeing, guardians rely on the support of those who understand their challenges: regional networks, and the "FTSU family." ¹

Recommendation: It is essential that **guardian networks are financed and encouraged to grow**. These networks are run by volunteers with no budget or administrative support, and if they are truly to sustain guardians they must be given the resources to do so.

In addition, the benefit of a National Professional Framework would provide a structure to bring together the national network of guardians. Belonging to a national network gives guardians a combined sense of belonging to a wider social movement.

Conclusion

To sustain the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian function, the NHS must move beyond expecting guardians to rely on personal resilience and actively support their professionalisation and wellbeing.

In environments where leaders are under pressure, in cultures which only want to hear good news, guardians' "problem sensing" function can be uncomfortable and unwelcome, and at risk of redundancy, downgrading or outsourcing.

¹ This survey was circulated via Freedom to Speak Up guardian networks, so there may be other guardians who are operating without this support.

Some form of national oversight is critical, in order for guardians to maintain their aura of independence and offer national learning and, potentially, protection for Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

This is because there exists at the centre of the role a tension between the guardians' independence and the leadership of the organisations who employ them or who contract them.

Placing responsibilities for the training and support of Freedom to Speak Up guardians into the hands of the people they challenge creates with it a moral hazard and a risk of further disparity between organisations' Speak Up culture and the safety of patients.

To illustrate, here is how one guardian commented in our survey:

“On paper, I am supported by the senior leadership and executive team. I have regular meetings with them, and there is visible, formal endorsement of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

However, this support exists alongside a structural tension. The culture created and reinforced by senior leadership is itself a key part of the wider systemic issues that influence whether staff feel safe to speak up. This creates an inherent conflict: the very group responsible for setting the organisational culture is also the group to whom I am most directly accountable and with whom I raise concerns about that culture.

In practice, this can limit psychological safety and constrain how freely concerns about leadership behaviours, power dynamics, or cultural issues can be escalated. While mechanisms for access and engagement exist, the independence required for the role to function optimally is more complex in reality than it appears on paper.”

Gowpen survey respondent

The public concern that money be invested in the NHS front line is just why guardian funding is vital. Guardians are working on the cultural frontline, supporting workers to keep patients safe.

With all the continued NHS "scandals" that are making the media which revolve around senior leaders not acting on concerns raised I cannot fathom how the Government or NHS England can do without the Guardian role. The continued cases where Trusts attempt to cover up concerns to protect individual and organisational reputation clearly demonstrates that Freedom to Speak Up requires strengthening and autonomy.

We as Guardians do this role because we care for the colleagues we support and most of all PATIENTS. Without a safe route for people to raise concerns will impact on patients.

Guardians need more support and strength in policy to safeguard our mental health and wellbeing. We are seeing day in day out the impact on our colleagues where staff raise concerns to their management teams but are not acted upon. This inaction causes harm.

Some managers choose not to respond to Guardians which impacts on our wellbeing as it causes us to feel helpless. External psychological support is imperative for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

Gowpen survey respondent



About Katherine Bradshaw

For over 25 years, I have supported some of the world’s biggest organisations in the development of strategies to support their ethical culture.

I am a subject matter expert on speaking up in the workplace and how encouraging open and supportive cultures can benefit organisations and the people who work for them.

I am the author of several Good Practices Guide for the Institute of Business Ethics including Encouraging a Speak Up Culture (2007 and 2017). I was privileged to have supported the work of Freedom to Speak Up guardians at the National Guardian’s Office from 2019 -2025.

In May 2025 I established Gowpen, and work as an advisor, trainer and facilitator using my insights and experience to help and support people to connect ethical business practice and wellbeing to truly nurture workplaces so that we can feel our best, give our best and do our best.

www.gowpen.co.uk

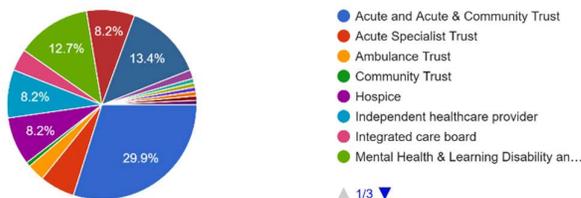
About the survey

Since June 2025, I have been supporting Freedom to Speak Up guardians by visiting the regional and national networks and providing a facilitated session focusing on their wellbeing.

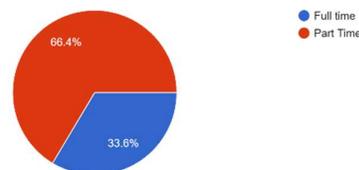
I also have been encouraging them to respond to an informal confidential asynchronous survey asking questions about their wellbeing and how they are supported. The link to the survey was also re-shared in January 2026 by some network chairs.

There have been 134 respondents, (c 10% of the guardian network) broken down as follows:

What sector is your organisation?
134 responses



Are you a full or part-time Freedom to Speak Up Guardian?
134 responses



If your organisation is inspected by the Care Quality Commission, what is your CQC rating?
126 responses

