

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

We would all like to think that we are free to speak up when things go wrong, or even just when we think things can be improved. All too often, however, we face barriers when we want to make our voice heard. These may include fear of reprisal, the belief that nothing will happen if we do speak up, or just the general sense that we are too busy to raise an issue that might distract us from our day job.

Unfortunately, when people don't speak up, the results can be disastrous with both workers and patients suffering as a result. The National Guardian's Office is an independent, non-statutory body that is leading culture change in the NHS so that speaking up becomes business as usual.

The office is funded by the CQC, NHS England and NHS Improvement and was established as a key recommendation from Sir Robert Francis' Freedom to Speak Up Review which looked at failings in care delivered at the Mid-Staffordshire Trust.

The office is not a regulator, but provides challenge and support across the healthcare system on all matters related to speaking up. Importantly it also provides leadership, support and guidance to a network of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians (FTSUGs).

All NHS trusts and foundation trusts have appointed FTSUGs, and the requirement to appoint a FTSUG extends to other providers of NHS services subject to the NHS standard contract, including independent providers of secondary care.

There are currently over 720 individuals acting as a FTSUG or supporting their FTSUG locally. FTSUGs are there to provide an alternative route to normal channels that people will use for speaking up. They are also there to work within their trust to identify and tackle barriers to speaking up, such as issues of bullying culture, poor levels of awareness, processes that place an undue burden on individuals when they raise issues, etc.

Over the past year, over 6,500 cases have been raised to guardians. Around 45 per cent of cases included an element of bullying and harassment and about 33 per cent included an element of patient safety/quality of care.

Recently the office published guidance, jointly with NHSI, advising Boards on how to ensure speaking up processes are working well in their trusts and how they can support their guardians. Ensuring that guardians are networked throughout their organisations, and that their work feeds into learning and culture change, is a vital element of the speaking up agenda.

Part of the work of the National Guardian's Office includes a case review function. Individuals and organisations that believe that good practice hasn't been followed when someone has spoken up may submit their case for review. The case review process is currently in a pilot phase, and so far two reports have been published, with another report due imminently and two more reviews underway. There is plenty more information on the National Guardian's Office webpages, including a directory listing contact details for guardians at every trust in England: <http://www.cqc.org.uk/national-guardians-office/content/national-guardians-office>