

## Freedom to Speak Up – your role as governors in a speak up, listen up, follow up culture

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Freedom to Speak Up is about being able to speak up about anything which gets in the way of doing a great job, whether that's an idea for improvement, ways of working, patient safety issues or negative behaviours. The pandemic has shown how vital Freedom to Speak Up is, not just to ensure that patients receive the best care, but also to protect the safety of workers.

Everyone who works in health has been under tremendous strain over the past year, working in the most challenging of circumstances. The NHS Staff Survey shows that 18% were considering leaving the NHS altogether. As the sector rebuilds following the pressures of the pandemic, retaining these highly skilled, dedicated workers has never been more essential.

Freedom to Speak Up empowers workers and assures them that their voice matters, that they will be listened to and positive actions taken for the benefit of patients and colleagues. Being listened to means that workers feel cherished, engaged and supported to do the best job they can. For organisations, when leaders listen to workers, this is an essential part of providing high quality care, because it gives workers that positive experience.

As governors, you hold a unique position in supporting your organisation. You yourself may have spoken up, for the benefit of your organisation, as you act as a critical friend, 'speaking truth to power', in holding non-executive directors to account. Understanding whether workers in your organisation have the freedom to speak up is essential to your role, whether you are a public governor, staff governor or patient/service user governor.

There is no single measure of culture, but the acid test is the impact this has on your patients and the views of workers. The National Guardian's Office publishes the [Freedom to Speak Up \(FTSU\) Index](#) - a metric drawn from four questions in the NHS Annual Staff Survey, on whether staff feel knowledgeable, encouraged and supported to raise concerns and if they agree they would be treated fairly if involved in an error, near miss or incident. Since the introduction of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in 2015 following the Francis Freedom to Speak Up Review, the FTSU Index has improved and risen 3.7 percentage points nationally from 75.5% in 2015 to 79.2%. We have seen the correlation between positive FTSU Index scores, and outstanding CQC ratings.

While we continue to see an upward trajectory, there is a continued disparity between the highest performing organisations and the lowest, with a 21 percentage point difference between the highest and lowest. More concerning is that this disparity has increased this year as the best organisations have continued to improve but those who are struggling have seen a decline in their FTSU Index

scores. This disparity is why we remain relentlessly focussed on sharing good practice to support improvement.

Data will give you insights but your role is to look behind the numbers, to join the dots. Where are the culture hotspots? Do workers feel supported and listened to? Are negative behaviours impacting on patient care? Who is not represented in your survey responses? Governors can use this as a tool to listen to the silence. This is important, to reduce the disenfranchisement of workers seen so starkly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may include workers who feel unable to speak up because they feel that to do so puts them at risk, whether due to their role, ethnicity or contract terms.

This is a whole organisational leadership approach, not just for the Non-executive Director who is the lead for Freedom to Speak Up, or as an agenda item for the Audit Committee. Together with NHS Improvement, we published [Guidance for Boards of NHS Trusts](#). This guidance can be applied by anyone who sets the strategy or culture of their organisation – whether trustees, governors of ICS or board members of national bodies, or independent health providers.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians work proactively to identify and tackle barriers to speaking up, working in partnership to promote positive speaking up culture and bringing themes and learning to senior leaders. The promoters and barriers to speaking up are common to all settings and organisations. Is it safe to speak up? Will I be listened to? Will positive action be taken or will I be victimised?

We have learned that the key elements of improving the speak up culture in an organisation are leadership, communication and engagement. Your Freedom to Speak Up Guardian can support your work, by sharing themes and working proactively to tackle barriers to speaking up. I encourage you to invite them to your meetings regularly to share their insights.

A positive culture relies not simply on workers speaking up – it needs listening up and following up to be effective. The [Freedom to Speak Up e-learning modules](#) we have developed in association with HEE on the e-learning for health platform, are free to access for all. These set out what speaking up is and its importance in creating an environment in which people are supported to deliver their best. The first module – Speak Up – is for everyone. The second module, Listen Up, for managers, builds upon the first and focuses on listening and understanding the barriers to speaking up. A final module, Follow Up, for senior leaders will be launched later in the year to support the development of Freedom to Speak Up as part of the strategic vision for organisations and systems. We encourage you to complete all three modules so that you will be able to foster the environment where speaking up is welcomed and business as usual.

We need to work together to ensure that everyone feels safe to speak up, and that the right actions will be taken when they do. To do so shows through deeds, rather than words, that the safety and wellbeing of patients and your workforce matters.