

Speak Up Review of NHS ambulance trusts

The National Guardian's Office supports the network of Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) Guardians in England and monitors both the implementation of the role and the development of a speaking up culture across NHS organisations. Today the National Guardian's Office has published the report of an investigation it carried out into the **implementation of FTSU Guardians in ambulance trusts**, with recommendations for trusts and national leaders. This short briefing summarises the contents of the report and sets out NHS Providers' view. If you have any comments or questions about this briefing, please contact Matt Case, policy advisor (matt.case@nhsproviders.org).

Key points

- The report acknowledges the efforts some ambulance trusts are making to implement Freedom to Speak Up and address cultural issues but finds in general, FTSU Guardians in ambulance trusts have limited support and struggle to act on concerns raised with them.
- The report finds there are serious cultural issues in ambulance trusts which make the work of FTSU Guardians more difficult and discourage staff from speaking out, including cultures of favouritism, 'command and control', and the existence of bullying and harassment.
- The report makes several recommendations for trusts including mandating speaking up training for all staff, investing in a network of staff to support FTSU Guardians, and developing board understanding and engagement with FTSU.

Findings

The National Guardian's Office conducted this review on the basis of consistent findings in national surveys that staff in ambulance trusts feel less able to speak up than staff in other organisations. It involved staff and leaders from all ambulance trusts in focus groups and individual interviews.

The report highlights several cultural issues within ambulance trusts which act as a barrier to speaking up and to creating an open culture more broadly, including:

- The existence of cliques within trusts, often related to long-service of some staff, which lead to perceptions of favouritism and preferential treatment and a fear of appearing disloyal by speaking up.
- Leadership cultures in ambulance trusts, which were described as being based on 'command and control' and a hierarchical uniform culture.
- Bullying, harassment and inappropriate behaviour, including serious issues with sexual harassment, creating a culture of fear and undermining psychological safety.

The report also found issues with the practical implementation of the FTSU Guardian role which also discouraged staff from speaking up, including:

- Poor understanding of FTSU by leaders, and poor board assurance of FTSU.
- Poor line management practices and poor engagement by line managers with the FTSU process.
- A lack of training and other wider assurance of FTSU, including poor communication with staff about the role of FTSU.

People that did speak up often reported having a poor experience, with the report highlighting issues such as:

- Poor handling of cases including issues with timeliness, confidentiality and conflicts of interests during investigations.
- A lack of feedback given to people who speak up, reinforcing the impression that issues are not being acted upon.
- Detriment being suffered by people who speak up including bullying and harassment.

FTSU Guardians were also found to lack sufficient resources to carry out their roles effectively, particularly given the wide geographies covered by ambulance trusts.

Recommendations

The report includes four main recommendations for the Government, regulators and trusts.

Recommendation one: Review broader cultural matters in ambulance trusts

This recommendation asks the government to oversee an independent review of ambulance trust cultures to consider issues such as governance, leadership cultures including 'command and control', recruitment processes and bullying and harassment.

The recommendation asks for an action plan based on the findings of the review.

Recommendation two: Make speaking up in ambulance trusts business as usual

This is a wide-ranging recommendation which includes several suggested actions for ambulance trusts, including:

- Mandating speaking up training for staff at all levels and for volunteers.
- Increasing board level engagement with FTSU, for example, by undertaking development sessions.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of speaking up arrangements within their organisation on an annual basis.

The National Guardian's Office has made several commitments to support the delivery of this recommendation, which is welcome. This includes working with NHS Providers and other partners to support trust boards around speaking up.

Recommendation three: Effectively regulate, inspect and support the improvement of speaking up culture in ambulance trusts

This recommendation asks the Care Quality Commission and NHS England to incorporate assessments of speaking up in their regulatory and oversight frameworks, including by training their inspection staff on speaking up and seeking evidence from trust leaders of their efforts to implement speaking up.

Recommendation four: Implement the FTSU Guardian role in accordance with national guidance to meet the needs of workers

This recommendation calls on ambulance trusts to increase investment in the implementation of the FTSU Guardian role and suggests some minimum steps ambulance trusts should take, including:

- Reviewing the level of resource required by their FTSU Guardians and their workers and presenting a proposal for future resourcing.
- Investing in a minimum of three full-time equivalent staff to carry out the reactive and proactive elements of the FTSU Guardian role.
- Establishing a network of FTSU Champions/Ambassadors to promote speaking up and support FTSU Guardians.
- Providing emotional and psychological well-being support to FTSU Guardians.

The report highlights existing [guidance](#) on implementing FTSU .

NHS Providers view

Freedom to Speak Up is an important means of building an open culture where staff feel psychologically safe and able to raise issues. FTSU Guardians should also be able to reassure staff that action is taken when issues are raised.

This report has some extremely challenging findings for ambulance trusts in particular, but we know there is variation in the effectiveness of FTSU in other trusts, so the findings are relevant more widely. In particular, trusts may recognise the findings that staff lack confidence that their issues will be addressed, or fear they may suffer detriment as a result of speaking up.

Trusts are under significant operational pressure and we know this makes it more difficult to make progress on cultural issues – but it is most important for staff to be able to speak up freely when the level of risk in the system is at its highest.

This report contains some important recommendations which we know trusts will reflect on carefully. NHS Providers will work with trusts and the National Guardian's Office to work through how these recommendations can be delivered effectively given the level of current pressures, and identify where we can offer support to trusts.

We particularly welcome the recommendation for the government to work with ambulance trusts to oversee a wider review of cultural issues which may be acting as a barrier to FTSU, and hope this will result in some practical solutions for trusts who have concerns about culture.

More broadly, we will continue to make the case to the government to invest in areas like workforce and capital investment which we know are essential to maintaining patient safety and can also give staff more time to invest in training on important priorities like FTSU.

NHS Providers press statement

Commenting on the report, Miriam Deakin, Director of Policy and Strategy at NHS Providers said:

“Trust leaders are committed to improving the experience of their staff and to ensuring a positive working culture, but we know there are still problems that need addressing.

“Bullying, harassment and discrimination have no place in the NHS.

“It’s vital that work is done to instil values and behaviours that create a more equal, diverse and inclusive health service where staff feel safe to speak up about issues affecting their patients and themselves.”