



**University Hospitals Sussex NHS
Foundation Trust (UHSx)**

**6 Month Report
1 April 2025 to 30th September
2025**



**The Guardian
Service**
Here to listen

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1. Executive summary

This report presents the Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) Guardians' Six-Month Report for the period 1st April 2025 – 1st October 2025 and provides an overview of the activity and themes that took place during this period.

- Staff raised 119 new concerns to the FTSU Guardians (FTSUG) in this period. It is encouraging to see staff are still feeling confident to raise their concerns, using all the options made available to them by the Trust.
- The top 3 themes for new concerns were System and Process (43), Management Issue (26) and Behaviour/relationships (22).
- The 3 directorates that had the most concerns raised were CSS Division (26), closely followed by Corportate Service (17) and Medicine (WOR & SRH) (16).
- The main reason for “Why use the Guardian Service” was to seek independent impartial support, solidifying the continued commitment of the trust to have independent FTSU provisions.
- No staff members have reported they suffered detriment because of speaking up. The perceived fear of detriment is however a major concern.
- Monthly and quarterly meetings have been held with Senior executives to discuss emerging themes. No identifiable data is shared without explicit permission from staff.
- The Trust continues to actively promote the Guardian Service and enhance staff awareness, providing ongoing support to the Guardians and giving due consideration to their recommendations.

2. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this six-monthly report is to supplement the monthly cumulative numerical reports by giving mid-year insight to the progress and development of the service and summary of the themes arising from the cases received by the Guardians.

This report provides an overview for the six months- 1st April 2025 to 30th September 2025 (Q1 of 2025/2026). The report follows the guidance from the National Guardian Office (NGO) on the content that Guardians should include when reporting to their board; Assessment of cases; Potential patients' safety or worker experience issues; Action taken to improve FTSU culture and Recommendations.

3. Background to Freedom to Speak Up

Following the Francis Inquiry¹ 2013 and 2015, the NHS launched 'Freedom to Speak Up' (FTSU). The aim of this initiative was to foster an open and responsive environment and culture throughout the NHS enabling staff to feel confident to speak up when things go or may go wrong; a key element to ensure a safe and effective working environment.

4. The Guardian Service

The Guardian Service Limited (GSL) is an independent and confidential staff liaison service. It was established in 2013 by the National NHS Patient Champion in response to The Francis Report. The Guardian Service provides staff with an independent, confidential 24/7 service to raise concerns, worries or risks in their workplace. It covers patient care and safety, whistleblowing, bullying, harassment, and work grievances. We work closely with the National Guardian Office (NGO) and attend the FTSU workshops, regional network meetings and FTSU conferences. The Guardian Service is advertised throughout the Trust as an independent organisation. This encourages staff to speak up freely and without fear of reprisal. Freedom to Speak Up is part of the well led agenda of the CQC inspection regime. The Guardian Service supports the Trust's Board to promote and comply with the NGO national reporting requirements.

The Guardian Service Ltd (GSL) was implemented in University of Sussex Trust on 7th August 2023.

Communication and marketing have been achieved by meetings with senior staff members, joining team meetings, site visits, the Intranet and the distribution of flyers and posters across the organisation. All new staff will become aware of the Guardian Service when undertaking the organisational induction programme.

5. Access and Independence

Being available and responsive to staff are key factors in the operation of the service. Many staff members, when speaking to a Guardian, have emphasised that a deciding factor in their decision to speak up and contacting GSL was that the Guardians are not UHSx employees and are external to the Trust. Members of staff can raise concerns to their Guardian by telephone, email or in-person.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-of-the-mid-staffordshire-nhs-foundation-trust-public-inquiry>

6. Categorisation of Calls and Agreed Escalation Timescales

The following timescales have been agreed and form part of the Service Level Agreement.

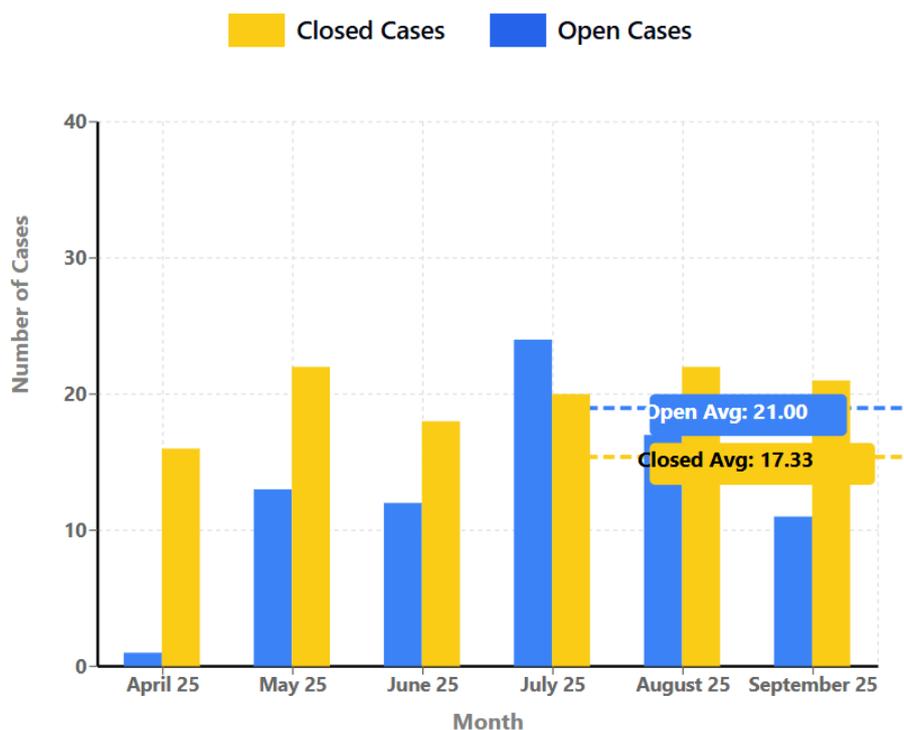
Call Type	Description	Agreed Escalation Timescales
Red	Includes patient and staff safety, safeguarding, danger to an individual including self-harm.	Response required within 12 hours
Amber	Includes bullying, harassment, and staff safety.	Response required within 48 hours
Green	General grievances e.g. a change in work conditions.	Response required within 72 hours
White	No discernible risk to organisation.	No organisational response required

Open cases are continually monitored, and regular contact is maintained by the Guardian with members of staff who have raised a concern to establish where ongoing support continues to be required. This can be via follow up phone calls and/or face to face meetings with staff who are in a situation where they feel they cannot escalate an issue for fear of reprisal. Guardians will also maintain contact until the situation is resolved, or the staff member is satisfied that no further action is required. Where there is a particular complex case, setbacks or avoidable delays in the progress of cases that have been escalated, these would be raised with the organisational lead for the Guardian Service at regular monthly meetings.

Escalated cases are cases which are referred to an appropriate manager, at the request of the employee, to ensure that appropriate action can be taken. Not all employees want their manager to know they have contacted the GSL, they either progress the matter themselves or take no further action. There are circumstances where cases are escalated at a later date by the Guardian. A staff member may take time to consider options and decide a course of action that is right for them. A Guardian will keep a case open and continue to support staff in such cases. In a few situations contact with the Guardian is not maintained by the staff member.

7. Case Activity

Case Activity by Month - April to September 2025



Staff at UHSx can use a variety of routes to raise concerns. e.g. Datix and HR. This report is limited to the concerns raised via The Guardian Service.

In this 6-month period the total number of new concerns raised is 119, and of these new cases, 78 were closed. The volume of concerns remains relatively stable, rising from 112 cases in the corresponding 2024 period to 119—an increase of 7 cases (6%).

Cases by Contact Method April-September 2025

Contact Method	Number of Cases
E-mail	67
Phone	46
In-Person	6

Most concerns raised to the Guardians are emailed, this includes the amount that are emailed to them directly. In-person reporting remains minimal; this highlights that staff prefer contact methods which offer greater confidentiality when raising concerns with the Guardians.

Case Severity Comparison - April to September 2024 vs 2025

Severity Level	2024	2025	Change
■ Red Cases	3	5	+2
■ Amber Cases	19	14	-5
■ Green Cases	87	100	+13
■ White Cases	3	0	-3
Total Cases	112	119	+7

Total cases increased by 7, amber cases decreased by 5, indicating a positive trend. The RAG rating stays consistent for the 6-month period in 2024 and 2025.

8. Confidentiality

Staff Confidentiality Preferences - April to September 2025

Confidentiality Level	Number of Concerns	Percentage of Concerns
Keep confidential within Guardian service remit	99	83.2%
Permission to escalate with name	11	9.2%
Permission to escalate without name	6	5.0%
Permission to escalate anonymously	3	2.5%
Total	119	100%

Case management by UHSx with respect to confidentiality and escalation is recorded as a cumulative figure. The breakdown for the 6-month period is shown above.

Confidentiality status may change over time. For example, after initial contact and with some reflection, a staff member may decide that their case should change confidentiality if escalated. In cases where staff do decide to escalate their concern they can do so anonymously, with their name or without their name being disclosed. These figures are not included in the data analysis.

On initial contact the Guardian informs the member of staff of the caveats to confidentiality, and while it usually remains at the staff members discretion, there are expectations and instances of safeguarding, staff safety/wellbeing or patient safety may be escalated without their consent. With all other concerns the Guardians will explore the member of staff's options moving forward, it is explained that the options are a way that the staff member feels appropriate, and that these options are informal.

For additional clarification, "Escalate Anonymously" means the Guardian does not know the name of the staff member. "Escalate without name" mean the Guardian knows the staff members name, but they have chosen to withhold it from the Trust.

Most concerns (83%) raised to the Guardians during this six-month period remained confidential. This figure is consistent with the corresponding period in 2024, which saw 81% of cases kept confidential.

When escalated 11 cases were escalated with the person's name, 9 concerns were escalated without or anonymously.

9. Themes

Concerns raised are broken down into the following categories.

Primary Themes Comparison - April to September 2024 vs 2025

Primary Theme	2024	2024 %	2025	2025 %	% pt diff.
A. Patient safety / quality	3	2.7%	5	4.2%	1.5%
B. Worker safety / wellbeing	4	3.6%	4	3.4%	-0.2%
C. Bullying / harassment	17	15.2%	13	10.9%	-4.3%
D. Behaviour / relationships	11	9.8%	22	18.5%	8.7%
E. Discrimination / inequality	8	7.1%	6	5.0%	-2.1%
F. Management issue	47	42.0%	26	21.8%	-20.1%
G. System / process	22	19.6%	43	36.1%	16.5%
H. Other	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%
I. Sexual misconduct	-	-	0	0.0%	0.0%
Total	112	100%	119	100%	

All Themes Comparison - April to September 2024 vs 2025

Theme	2024	%	2025	%	% pt diff.
A. Patient safety / quality	8	4.7%	11	4.8%	0.1%
B. Worker safety / wellbeing	15	8.8%	19	8.4%	-0.4%
C. Bullying / harassment	21	12.3%	14	6.2%	-6.1%
D. Behaviour / relationships	17	9.9%	41	18.1%	8.2%
E. Discrimination / inequality	15	8.8%	13	5.7%	-3.1%
F. Management issue	65	38.0%	68	30.0%	-8.0%
G. System / process	29	17.0%	60	26.4%	9.4%
H. Other	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	-0.6%
I. Sexual misconduct	-	-	1	0.4%	0.4%
Total Theme Occurrences	171	100%	227	100%	

The 2024/25 NGO Speaking Up Data report identified inappropriate behaviours and attitudes as the most frequently reported concern nationally for the second consecutive year, accounting for 40% of all cases. At UHSx, when combining behaviour/relationships, discrimination/inequality, management issue, and sexual misconduct themes, inappropriate attitudes and behaviours account for 122 out of 227 cases (54%) for the six-month period, suggesting UHSx may be experiencing a higher proportion of these concerns than the national average.

However, the most prevalent individual theme at UHSx is management issue, with 68 cases in 2025. System and process issues have increased significantly by 31 cases (from 29 to 60), representing the second most common theme.

Many cases have multiple themes. Even though staff are increasingly giving 'system and process' as a primary theme alongside 'management', management issues also still feature frequently as a secondary theme. Behaviour/relationships issues have increased significantly by 24 cases (from 17 to 41), appearing increasingly in both primary and secondary themes, indicating a genuine increase in interpersonal workplace problems that affects many cases regardless of what is chosen as their primary theme.

10. Assessment of Cases

Cases by Professional Level - April to September 2024 vs 2025

Professional Level	2024	2025	Change
Worker	92	89	-3
Senior Leader	0	1	+1
Manager	17	24	+7
Not Disclosed	3	5	+2
Total	112	119	+7

Of the 119 cases raised in April-Sep 2025 the majority have come from workers, 1 from a Senior Leader and 24 from Management. 5 were not disclosed. When this is compared to the proportion of each professional level in the Trust the number of cases for each is not unexpected. Manager cases increased by 41%, suggesting that either managers are having more workplace issues or that they feel more comfortable raising concerns to the Guardians.

GSL survey results indicate that system and process issues remain the predominant theme across their trusts in 24/25. However, behaviour and relationship concerns are less frequently reported on average across other GSL trusts compared to UHSx.

Patient Safety/quality:

There were 5 cases with a primary theme of Patient/Staff safety and a total of 11 under All Themes. Examples of Patient Safety/quality include:

- Resourcing and capability issues
- Questions around medication

Bullying and Harassment:

There were 13 cases with a primary theme of bullying and harassment and a total of 14 under All Themes. Some examples of Bullying and Harassment issues raised from staff include:

- Using intimidating language and behaviours
- Conversation tone – accusatory, behaviours, micromanaging
- Micromanagement, belittling publicly and treating staff differently to others
- Unrealistic expectations/not supportive of reasonable adjustments
- Not being accepted/made to feel comfortable when joining a new Team or Department.

Worker Safety/Wellbeing:

There were 4 cases with a primary theme of behaviour and relationships and a total of 19 under All Themes. Some examples of concerns include:

- Psychological safety.

Behaviour and Relationships:

There were 22 cases with a primary theme of behaviour and relationships and a total of 41 under All Themes. Some examples of concerns raised include:

- Inappropriate behaviour after a breakdown in personal relationship with a colleague
- Inappropriate language, swearing
- Colleagues aggressive/angry behaviour
- Senior colleague dismissive of staff members
- Breach of confidentiality and gossiping about other staff

Discrimination and Inequality:

6 cases had a primary theme of Discrimination or Inequality and a total of 13 under All Themes. Some examples from staff include:

- Staff felt discriminated against in how a recruitment process was concluded
- Feeling treated differently because of protected characteristics
- Disability discrimination and delay in obtaining equipment needed/suggested in Occupational Health reports.

Management Issue:

There were 26 cases had a primary theme of Management Issue and a total of 68 cases under All Themes. Some of the issues reported by staff include:

- Leadership style, unprofessional behaviour/style, communication, micromanaging
- Management capability – lacking leadership/leadership skills, direction, inability or unwillingness to engage
- Manager displays lack of concern and soft skills
- Management of policy, particularly around wellbeing and occupational health referrals
- Manager's behaviour generally around staff health situation/disability
- Managers avoid or mishandle conflicts
- Lack of clear, and transparent, two-way communication between managers & staff.

System and Process:

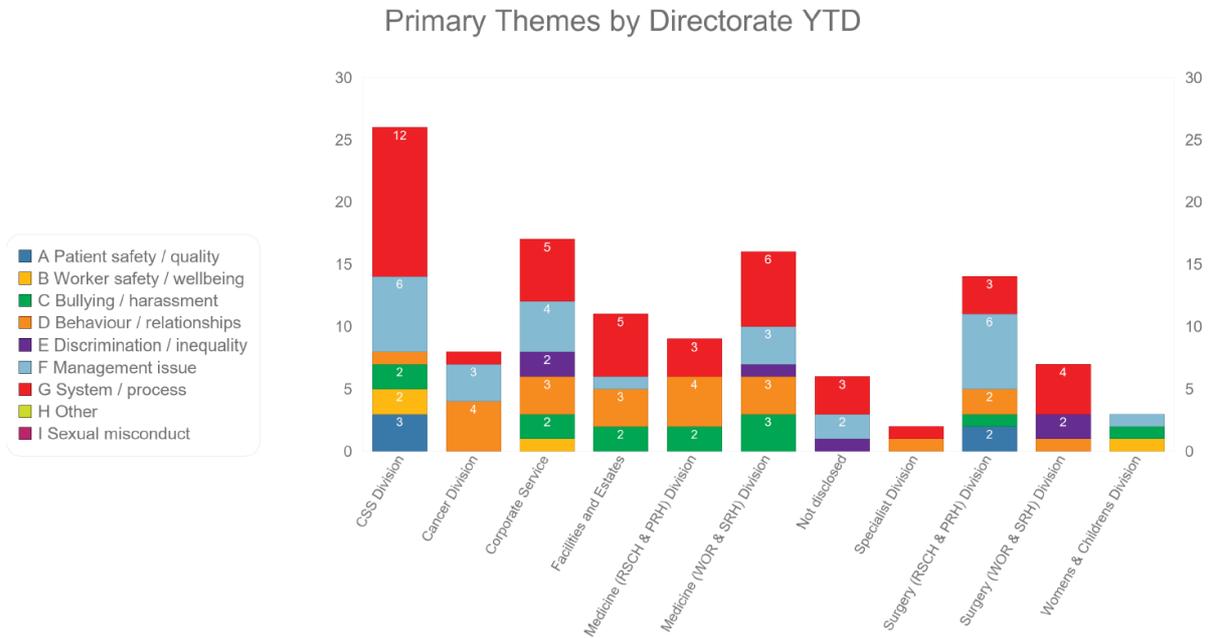
Most of the 119 cases in 2025, 43 in total, were themed as System and Process and a total of 60 cases under All Themes. Some examples from staff include:

- Delays/No acknowledgement or response to emails
- Lack of wellbeing support/updates during formal processes from managers
- Staff raised various concerns around the management of disability related absences and long-term sickness conditions, feeling a lack of support or thoughtful considerations.

Sexual misconduct:

During the 6-month period no cases involving Sexual misconduct as a primary theme and a total of 1 under All Themes.

11. Concerns Raised by Directorate



11. Concerns raised by Location

Concerns Raised by Location - April to September 2025

Location	Number of Concerns	Percentage of Concerns
Royal Sussex County Hospital	41	34.5%
St Richard's Hospital	27	22.7%
Worthing Hospital	17	14.3%
Princess Royal Hospital	12	10.1%
Brighton General Hospital	7	5.9%
Sussex Eye Hospital	6	5.0%
Southlands Hospital	3	2.5%
University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust	3	2.5%
Not disclosed	2	1.7%
Royal Alexandra Hospital For Sick Children	1	0.8%
Total	119	100%

12. Concerns raised by Job Group

Concerns Raised by Job Group April-September 2025

Job Group	Number of Concerns
Nursing and Midwifery	28
Administrative and Clerical	23
Additional Clinical Services	17
Allied Health Professional	12
Estate and Ancillary	11
Medical and Dental	10
Not Disclosed	8
Healthcare Scientist	4
Additional Professional	3
Students	3
Total	119

12.1 Escalation

One possible outcome when concerns are raised is escalation to Senior Leaders or Managers who may be better positioned to address the issue or provide the answers to the individual seeking. In some cases, escalation serves solely to inform the relevant party about the concern. Escalations can be made either with or without identifying the person raising the concern.

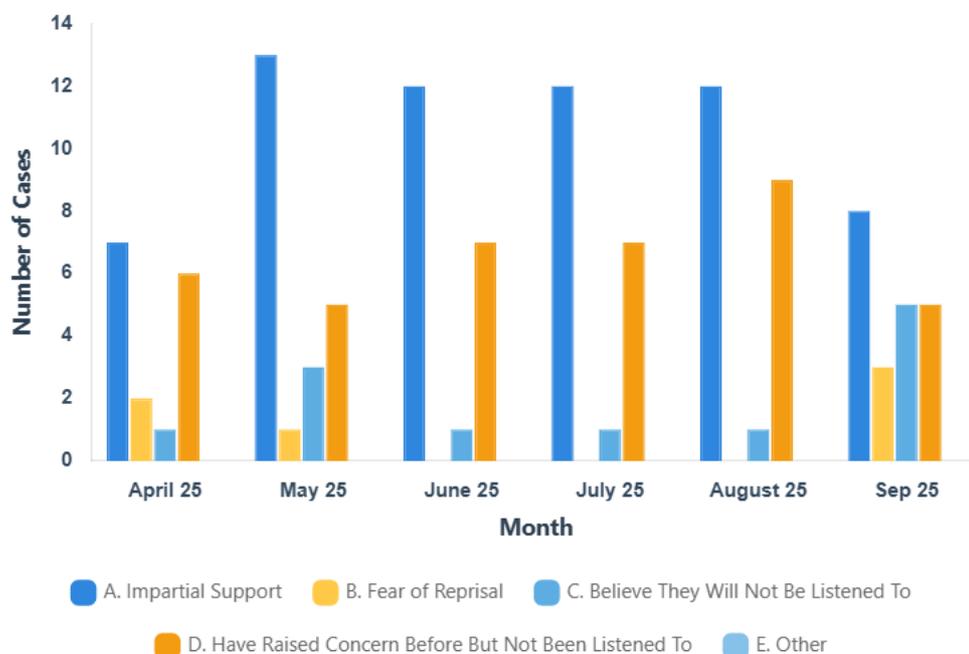
Nearly half of cases raised with Guardians still do not result in escalation by the Guardians. We continue to be told by those we support that this is often because, following the confidential and impartial support we provide, they feel able to raise the matter themselves. The GSL is planning further work to investigate these cases so we can properly understand how interaction with our service supports escalation through 'regular' channels.

Why do staff use The Guardian Service?

While the Guardian Service provides an important route for staff to raise workplace concerns, Guardians remind staff of alternative channels available within the Trust, such as Datix for incident reporting, direct conversations with line managers, HR support, and other relevant pathways.

However, without triangulating data from these various reporting systems, it is not possible to establish a complete picture of concerns across the Trust.

Reasons for Speaking-Up April-September 2025



The Guardian Service records the reasons staff members choose to speak up, offering five options: impartial support, fear of reprisal, believe they will not be listened to, have raised concern before but have not been listened to, or Other.

The graph above illustrates the reasons for Speaking Up between April and September 2025. The pattern remained consistent across the six-month period, with impartial support being the predominant reason staff engage with the Guardians. This strong preference for impartial support underscores the importance of having an independent person to Speak Up to outside of the Trust. The desire for impartial and independent support remains the primary reason workers contact the Guardians; this is also reflected in other GSL Trusts.

It is important to note that staff can select only one reason, meaning the data does not fully capture cases where multiple factors influence the decision to speak up. For instance, a staff member may require impartial support while simultaneously believing they will not be listened to.

Additionally, these figures reflect only the reasons why staff do speak up, not the barriers preventing others from raising concerns. The 2024 NHS Staff Survey shows the ongoing importance of this work. While not specific to the Guardian service, only 63.4% of our staff said they felt safe to raise concerns about unsafe clinical practice, and 48.4% were confident the organisation would act.

13. Detriment

National Guardian Office (NGO) data from 2023/24 indicates that 4% of cases involved staff who believed they had experienced detrimental treatment because of speaking up and the data from 2024/25 shows a drop to 3%.

While the most recent NGO figures are not yet available, no detriment cases were recorded in UHSx between April and September 2025. Similarly low figures are evident across all Trusts supported by the Guardian Service.

However, despite minimal actual instances of detriment, the fear of reprisal remains very real. Guardians consistently encounter staff who have heard accounts of colleagues experiencing negative consequences after speaking up. These staff express concern about potential job loss or damage to their professional relationships.

Guardians work to reassure staff that detriment is not tolerated within UHSx or across the NHS, and that speaking up is valued and supported. While there is no immediate solution to eliminate this fear, cultural change can gradually reduce the perception of detriment as a barrier to speaking up.

14. Action taken to improve the Freedom to Speak Up Culture

- The FTSUG supports staff to resolve concerns informally, thereby avoiding the Resolution/Grievance process which can be an adversarial and costly process. Sometimes helping the individual see the bigger picture – seeing things from a different perspective can help in moving things forward and resolving issues.
- Following the 2024/25 annual report and subsequent discussions, an Action Plan was developed, with specific actions assigned to appropriate individuals. This enables progress monitoring and ensures accountability for progress.
- The NHS 24/25 staff survey identified departments with low Speaking Up awareness, which triggered the In-Reach activity. The Guardians were given department-specific information to help them raise awareness of the service and offer support to those specific departments.

15. Learning and Improvements

At FTSU level:

- The FTSUG attends fortnightly “Listen and Learn” meetings with other FTSU Guardians within GSL. These reflective conversations aid the FTSUG’s continual learning.
- The FTSUGs attends events and meetings organised by the National Guardian Office (NGO). This, as well as the NGO bulletin enables the Guardians to stay abreast of developments in the field which in turn support handling concerns effectively.
- The FTSUG takes a coaching approach and supports staff to address their concerns. Staff are encouraged, where appropriate, to raise their concerns initially with their line manager or another leader in their division. Exploring ideas on using existing tools, like team meetings and supervision, can also help an individual bring about a resolution. The FTSUG is an empathetic listener and often just providing a listening ear is all that is required to help staff address their concerns.

- The Guardian Service has a large client base, nationally across NHS Trusts, this enables us to compare best practice approaches in respect to policy, service implementation, and organisational response.
- All FTSUGs complete Mental Health First Aid Training (MHFA – England) and annual NGO refresher training.

At Trust level:

- The NHS 24/25 staff survey results revealed low overall confidence in speaking up within the Trust. Analysis was hindered by an incapability to distinguish between responses relating to the Guardians and those referring to general speaking up mechanisms across the Trust. To address this, two local questions specifically referencing the Guardian have been added to the 2025 Staff Survey. The resulting analysis will identify awareness levels across different departments, enabling a more targeted approach to supporting areas with low awareness and confidence in the Guardian service.

16. Comments & Recommendations

- Staff survey findings will guide targeted Freedom to Speak Up support to areas of greatest need, delivered through joint working between the Guardians and the Engagement Team.
- Recorded detriment cases remain low. Informally, during promotional activities and site visits, staff frequently cite fear of repercussions as their primary barrier to speaking up. Despite the Trust's zero-tolerance policy on detriment, staff anxiety persists, with many referencing incidents they claim to have witnessed or heard about. This reveals a significant gap between organisational policy and staff perception. Senior leaders could help counter these perceptions through a visible campaign, that not only encourages speaking up but actively praises staff for their courage in raising concerns, thereby reframing the narrative from fear to positive recognition.
- Staff have also informally raised concerns about confusion surrounding their reporting lines. When the Guardians discuss escalation procedures, staff frequently express uncertainty about who should receive escalated concerns and are often unable to identify their second-line manager. Conversations with staff indicate that the prevalence of interim leadership positions, combined with frequent turnover, makes it difficult for them to maintain awareness of the current leadership. A consideration is for staff be provided with a flowchart or document depicting change of leadership, which they can access when necessary.
- Freedom to Speak Up has gained considerable traction in recent months through, for example, essential training, Freedom to Speak Up week, and in-reach activities. To sustain this progress, it is recommended that a 12-month comms plan be developed, maintaining collaborative working relationships with GSL and the UHSx Communications Department.

17. Staff Feedback

When a case is closed, the staff member receives a voluntary GSL feedback form. Below is a small selection of some of the comments received on the survey;

- *“Thank you for the invaluable support you provided. Your assistance empowered me to continue working in what was previously a hostile environment.”*
- *“I would speak to the guardian service again, I was heard and given time which was helpful as I sometimes struggle to articulate under stress.”*
- *“The guardian respected my perspective.”*
- *“The concern has been partially addressed by the department. However, they have not responded to the extent of my concerns.”*
- *“Never received any information of any outcome.”*
- *“The concern is going to take longer to be resolve.”*
- *“Very quick and helpful responses. Helped the situation be resolved quickly where previously I was unable to make progress.”*
- *“The Guardian was very supportive during this time and understood the issues with my concern. The service provided was excellent and I will definitely contact her again.”*