



Work In  
Confidence

# Improving Speaking Up in the NHS



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# THE CATALYST FOR FREEDOM TO SPEAK UP

## **“The silence of missing voices costs careers, relationships and lives”**

*-Megan Reitz, Ashridge Business Schools peaking at 2023 Freedom to Speak-Up Annual Conference.*

The National Guardian's Office and the role of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian were created in response to recommendations made in Sir Robert Francis QC's report "The Freedom to Speak Up" (2015) following the tragic events which unfolded in the Mid Staff NHS Foundation Trust.

Sir Robert noted that the NHS culture did not always encourage or support staff to speak up, and that patients and staff suffered as a result. A central message from the report remains highly relevant today. Organisations perform better (for staff and patients), when people feel safe to raise concerns, share ideas, and offer feedback.

High profile patient safety cases constantly reinforce how vital it is for organisations to have a culture in which people feel safe to speak up about anything that gets in the way of delivering safe and high-quality care. These cases also highlight the importance of joining up the dots when things are raised across an organisation, as well as grabbing and embedding learnings.

Embracing Freedom to Speak Up by listening to and acting on the suggestions and concerns of staff is critical for learning and improvement. Senior leaders therefore play a critical role. Creating a genuinely open culture requires visible support, consistent action, and reassurance that speaking up will never result in detriment.

At the same time we must acknowledge that despite the great progress which has been made, there is still a speaking up gap. It is not sufficient to say we have more speak up cases (which is good), when the number of people feeling unable to speak up is stubbornly high. We must go beyond telling people it is safe to speak up, without looking at the barriers they feel - and what would need to change to make them feel safe.



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# SOME HARD FACTS TO CONSIDER ABOUT SPEAKING UP IN HEALTHCARE

Speaking up in healthcare environments can be complex. While there has been significant progress since the introduction of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, many workforce pressures and cultural barriers remain.

Recent workforce surveys and professional body reports highlight several ongoing challenges:

- Bullying, harassment and discrimination remain persistent concerns. Around 1 in 5 NHS staff still report experiencing workplace bullying or harassment, yet reporting rates vary significantly.
- Fear of career impact remains a barrier. Surveys of senior clinicians have suggested many still worry that raising patient safety concerns could negatively affect their careers.
- Discrimination concerns continue to affect psychological safety. Research among healthcare professionals has highlighted ongoing experiences of racism, harassment and inequity in parts of the workforce.
- Workplace culture influences patient safety. Evidence consistently shows that organisations with stronger speaking-up cultures have better staff wellbeing, retention and patient outcomes.
- Silence carries organisational risk. Unaddressed concerns can affect staff morale, productivity, retention, and ultimately quality of care.

Encouraging a culture where staff feel safe to raise concerns, whether openly or anonymously is therefore not simply a compliance exercise. It is fundamental to organisational learning, workforce wellbeing and patient safety.

# GROWTH IN FREEDOM TO SPEAK UP ACTIVITY

In many ways, Freedom to Speak Up has been a major success with cases raised through it growing rapidly.

During 2024/25 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians handled over 38,000 cases across the NHS, reflecting growing awareness of speaking-up channels, and also highlighting ongoing cultural changes. This shows how valued and trusted Freedom to Speak Up is as a route for speaking up by much of the NHS workforce.



**18.6%**  
Increase

**38,158 cases** - This is the highest number of cases ever recorded – an 18.6 per cent increase from 2023/24.

**11.6%**  
Cases raised

The percentage of cases that were raised **anonymously** increased to **11.6 per cent**, up from 9.5 per cent in 2023/24.

**2.9%**  
Indicated

**Detriment** for speaking up was indicated in **2.9 per cent** of cases, a decrease of 1.1 per cent.

**79.9%**  
Speak up again

**79.9 per cent** of those who gave feedback said **they would speak up again**.

“

During 2024/25, the ability of workers to feel confident to speak up remained at the forefront of the news, with continued high-profile cases and the Thirwall Inquiry. It is imperative that improving workplace cultures is at the forefront of leaders and managers foci. Without an engaged workforce where workers are confident and able to raise concerns and suggest improvements, whose voices are valued and acted on, quality and safety of services are at risk. The work of the National Guardian’s Office continued at pace during the year.

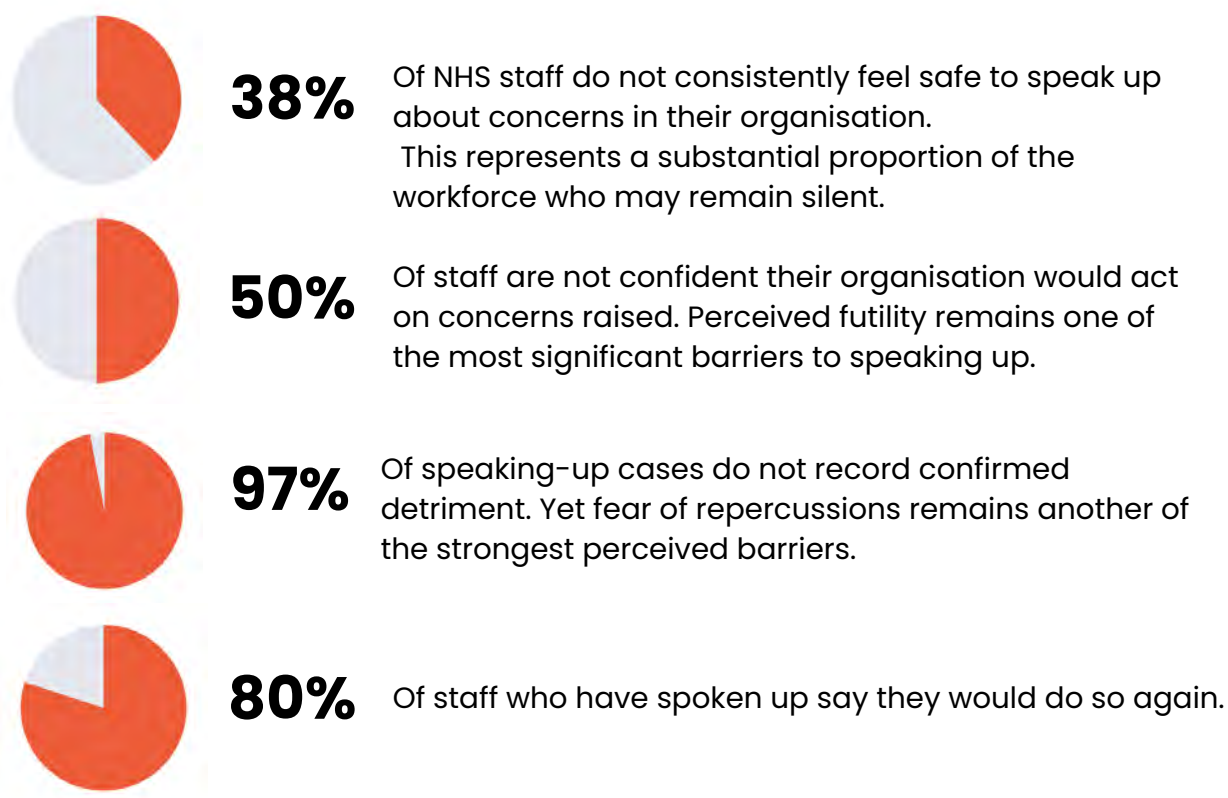
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Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark, National Guardian, National Guardian’s Office

## STILL OVER 38% NHS STAFF NOT ABLE TO SPEAK UP

However encouraging these figures are, over 38% of NHS staff still say they are not willing to come forward and speak up. Usually the inhibitors are fear of detriment and reprisal and a sense of futility. This appears to have worsened rather than improved over the last three years.

The Freedom to Speak Up sub-score in the most recent NHS Staff Survey stands at approximately 6.45, showing only marginal movement compared to previous years. While this indicates overall stability rather than decline, it also suggests that progress in strengthening speaking-up culture has plateaued. Given the scale of the NHS workforce survey – with over 600,000 respondents – even small shifts in score represent the perceptions of thousands of staff. Sustained improvement will require continued focus on psychological safety, leadership behaviour and visible follow-through when concerns are raised.



Taken from NGO Annual Report 2025

Recent NHS Staff Survey findings suggest that progress in speaking-up culture has largely stabilised in recent years rather than showing sustained improvement. While overall Freedom to Speak Up scores remain broadly consistent, variation persists between organisations and Trust types.

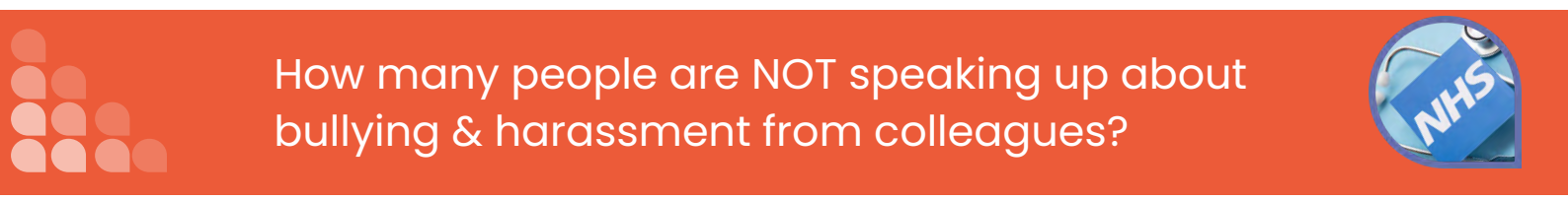
Ambulance services and some acute settings continue to report comparatively lower speaking-up scores, while community services tend to perform more strongly. These differences may reflect varying operational pressures, workforce dynamics and service demands.

There also remains noticeable disparity between the highest and lowest performing organisations. This variation highlights that speaking-up culture is not uniform across the NHS and that sustained leadership attention is required to ensure consistent psychological safety and staff confidence across all settings.

**The full report can be accessed via the National Guardian’s Office website.**

## **Over 50% of NHS staff who are bullied or harassed at work do not speak up**

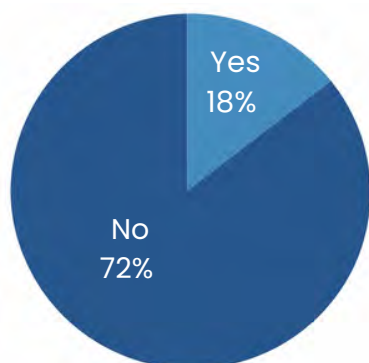
According to the 2022/2023 NHS Survey, there are still a very large number of NHS staff who struggle to speak up about bullying and harassment – potentially damaging lives of staff and patients. The survey highlights 12% of staff report being bullied by a manager, 19% by a colleague but only 50% said they or a colleague raised it.



How many people are NOT speaking up about bullying & harassment from colleagues?



Have experienced at least one incident of harassment, bullying or abuse in the last 12 months from **colleagues**



**THIS WOULD MEAN**

252,000 of 1.4m people in the NHS had experienced bullying from a colleague



Have you reported it?  
Yes: 51.9% No: 48.1%

**THIS WOULD MEAN**

121,221 people did not raise bullying and harassment by a colleague



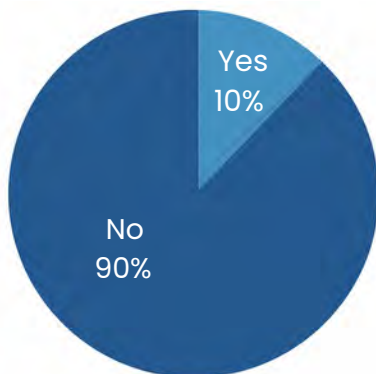
This would mean 189,899 people across the NHS who had been bullied or harassed by a manager or colleague had not raised it

Figures from NHS StaffSurvey 2023/24 - Nationally

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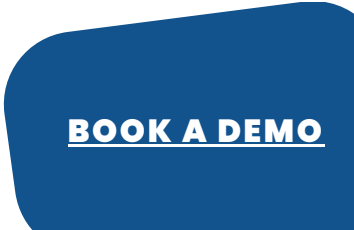


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## Some hard facts to digest

- ▶ NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) data continues to show ethnic minority staff are more likely to experience bullying and harassment than white colleagues, yet formal reporting rates remain low.
- ▶ A survey published by the British Journal of Surgery found that 63.3% of female surgeons and 23.7% of male surgeons had been the target of sexual harassment by colleagues
- ▶ 60% of people experience or witness workplace bullying – less than half raise it. This costs the UK economy £18bn per year.
- ▶ Female NHS staff report higher rates of bullying, harassment and abuse than male staff overall. This difference is particularly marked when intersected with ethnicity.
- ▶ A survey of over 500 hospital consultants conducted by the HCSA, 71% of respondents said they believed raising patient safety concerns could negatively impact their careers.



# THE PLACE FOR ANONYMITY

Anonymity can be a highly effective route to helping people overcome the fear of speaking up. It can be an alternative route to open the door to a conversation for many of the 38% of people who feel unable to speak up.

A two-way anonymous reporting channel allows employees to share their thoughts and ideas without fear of retaliation or embarrassment. Here are some ways this type of communication channel could benefit an organisation:

- **Encourages Candour:** When employees can communicate anonymously, they are more likely to be candid and transparent about their thoughts and ideas. This can lead to more constructive feedback and better decision-making.
- **Increases trust:** A two way anonymous communication channel can help build trust between employees and management, as it shows that the organisation is committed to listening to feedback and addressing concerns.
- **Allows for constructive criticism:** When employees can provide anonymous feedback, they may be more likely to offer constructive criticism that can help improve processes and procedures within the organisation (misuse can be moderated).
- **Fosters innovation:** An anonymous communication channel can help generate new ideas and spur innovation, as staff feel more comfortable sharing their creative thoughts and suggestions.
- **Gives the opportunity to hear otherwise silent voices:** “The silence of missing voices costs careers, relationships and lives”.

Conversely, organisations with strong speaking-up cultures often see:

- Better staff morale
- Improved patient safety outcomes
- More effective organisational learning
- Enhanced employer reputation.

Speaking up should therefore be seen not simply as compliance – but as a strategic organisational asset.



# WHY MULTIPLE REPORTING CHANNELS MATTER

Best practice guidance from professional bodies consistently recommends offering a range of speaking-up options, including:

- Line management routes
- Freedom to Speak Up Guardians
- Independent or external reporting channels
- Anonymous feedback tools
- HR and wellbeing support services

Different individuals feel comfortable using different channels. Providing choice increases accessibility and trust.

“

My belief is we should have as many pathways as possible to help our staff come forward in raising a concern, providing the potential for early intervention, with correlations in reducing sickness and absence, addressing poor behaviours and working towards better health and quality care patient outcomes. The method or pathway for reporting a concern should not itself be a barrier for staff!

”

**TONY BOTTIGLIERI**  
**Freedom to Speak Up Guardian,**  
**Royal Papworth Hospital**  
**NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge**



# DON'T JUST TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT ON ANONYMITY

**TUC:** Staff and members need access to clear and safe reporting routes. As outlined in the TUC example policy, reporting routes should be clearly communicated and signposted throughout the organisation, making clear the different processes for formal, informal, and **anonymous reporting** and the actions that can then be taken. Where survivors do not want to make a direct formal complaint of sexual violence, unions should appropriately record informal reporting and rumours of sexual violence.

Those reporting incidences, and those who have reports disclosed to them, should have access to take up well-being, therapeutic, and specialist support services, should they wish to.

**Institute for Business Ethics:** "Different people will have different preferences on how to communicate, and an effective Speak Up channel accommodates these preferences by offering a variety of ways to report.

For example, organisations can offer a question channel, an externally operated hotline, and designate internal key persons or ombudspersons as channels through which to report. **Each channel offers a different degree of independence and anonymity**, which suits a wider range of employees."

**CIPD:** Anonymous and/or confidential methods like telephone helplines run by third parties to provide support, and/or online reporting tools to report harassment, could be reassuring for people to encourage better reporting. This is backed up by our survey findings: around one in five employees cite worries about confidentiality and/or lack of a channel to raise concerns confidentially or anonymously as reasons why they did not report their experience of bullying and harassment.

**DHSC:** An independent review commissioned by DHSC into the leadership of health and social care organisations, found there to be a lack of consistency in leadership to support speaking up. The Review noted "in the NHS, we sensed a lack of psychological safety to speak up and listen, despite the excellent progress made since the Francis Report. We would observe that the Freedom to Speak Up initiative can be narrowly perceived through the lens of whistleblowing rather than also organisational improvement, and we would encourage a broader perspective".

Harvard Business Review: Despite the high rates of sexual assault and harassment and pervasive discrimination based on race, gender, age, and sexuality in many workplaces, reporting rates remain extremely low. This is in large part because employees fear that the company will respond to reports by further punishing or marginalizing the victim. If you want to increase reporting rates at your company – and thereby make your workplace a more equitable, inclusive, and safe place to work – the author suggests four practices to rethink your reporting system:

- Demonstrate commitment to accountability from the most senior leaders
- Invest in external support resources, such as a private therapist or employee assistance programme, to help victims of harassment and discrimination
- Establish an independent ombudsperson (or ombuds) office that can speak candidly with employees about their fears and concerns, and guide them through the reporting options available
- Create anonymous formal reporting channels that both protect those who speak up and help inform organisational improvement and cultural change.

## **Conclusion: Embedding a Sustainable Speaking-Up Culture**

The NHS has made significant progress in strengthening its approach to speaking up, with clearer reporting routes, Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and growing awareness of staff voice supporting positive change. However, workforce evidence continues to show that many staff still experience barriers to raising concerns, particularly where fear of negative consequences or perceived lack of impact persists.

For Boards and senior leaders, speaking up is not simply a compliance requirement but a core element of organisational governance, culture and patient safety. Organisations that listen effectively to staff are better positioned to identify risks early, support workforce wellbeing and sustain high-quality care.

There is also a practical organisational impact. Workforce turnover, agency reliance, absence, grievance processes and litigation costs can all be influenced by workplace culture. Speaking-up arrangements may also contribute to how organisations are viewed through regulatory inspections, including CQC assessments, where culture, safety and staff experience increasingly form part of the overall picture.

Developing a sustainable speaking-up culture requires consistent leadership behaviour, psychological safety across teams, visible follow-through on concerns raised and accessible reporting routes that reflect the diverse needs of the workforce, including confidential or anonymous options where appropriate.

Ultimately, the measure of success is whether staff feel confident their voices are heard and acted upon. Maintaining that confidence supports organisational resilience, workforce stability and the delivery of safe, compassionate care across the NHS.

## **APPENDIX: KEY SPEAKING-UP & WORKFORCE STATISTICS (2026)**

This appendix provides supporting data referenced in this guide. Figures are drawn from NHS workforce surveys, national speaking-up reports and sector research. Where ranges are used, they reflect variation across organisations and workforce groups.

### **Freedom to Speak Up Activity**

- Freedom to Speak Up Guardians now support tens of thousands of cases annually across the NHS.
- Increased reporting reflects both improved awareness of speaking-up channels and continued workforce pressures.

Primary source: National Guardian's Office annual reporting.

### **Speaking-Up Confidence**

- NHS staff surveys consistently show that around one-third of staff still report barriers to speaking up.
- Common reasons include fear of repercussions, lack of psychological safety, and belief nothing will change.

Primary source: NHS Staff Survey results (recent cycles).

### **Workforce Turnover Costs**

- Replacing a fully trained NHS nurse is estimated at around £12,000 (recruitment and onboarding costs alone).
- Clinician replacement costs may range £15,000–£30,000+ depending on seniority and cover required.
- Many NHS workforce models use ~£15,000–£20,000 average cost per leaver for planning purposes.

Sources: NHS workforce analytics, Health Foundation workforce analysis, NHS retention research.

### **Cost of Workplace Bullying**

- Bullying and harassment are estimated to cost the NHS over £2 billion annually through sickness absence, turnover and lost productivity.

Sources: NHS Civility & Respect programme; Kline & Lewis NHS workforce research.



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## **APPENDIX: KEY SPEAKING-UP & WORKFORCE STATISTICS (2026) – CONTINUED**

### **Why These Statistics Matter...**

**Failing to address workforce concerns can have significant organisational impacts, including:**

- Higher staff turnover and recruitment costs
- Increased agency staffing spend
- Reduced engagement and productivity
- Greater organisational risk exposure
- Potential reputational impact

**Research consistently links strong speaking-up cultures with:**

- Better staff wellbeing
- Lower employee turnover
- Improved patient safety
- Stronger organisational learning.



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## About Us

**At WorkInConfidence, our mission is to empower organisations to build healthier, safer, more engaged and productive workplaces. Our platform gives every employee a voice within an environment of psychological safety.**

 <b>Employee Voice</b>	 <b>Psychological Safety</b>	 <b>Leadership Insights</b>
Creating trusted channels for authentic communication	Building environments where everyone feels safe to speak up	Providing actionable data for informed decision making leading to improved culture and organisational performance.

WorkInConfidence is used across over 100 organisations (c. 200k staff) in the private, public and not for profit sectors. We have a decade of experience delivering a highly secure, easy to use system. WorkInConfidence is registered with the ICO for data protection purposes and is IASME and Cyber Essentials Plus certified.

## One Comprehensive Solution Via One Unified Online Platform

 <b>Anonymous Two-Way Speak Up</b>	 <b>Open Case Logging</b>	 <b>Case Management</b>
Removing fear and worry for the nervous or reticent to Speak Up about bullying and harassment, DEI, wellness or ideation.	People who are comfortable with being identified can log cases openly.	All cases (whether received via the platform or directly) can be easily stored, shared, and tracked.
 <b>Clear Central Reporting &amp; Actionable Insights</b>	 <b>Employee Forums</b>	 <b>Surveys</b>
Spot patterns, emerging risks, and identify opportunities for improvement. Provide clear reporting to the Senior Leadership Team, regulators, or the Board.	Enable open discussions to learn and improve.	Gather feedback through pulse, mini or long surveys. Discover and learn from employee viewpoints.

## Corporate & Contacts

**Contact:** [help@workinconfidence.com](mailto:help@workinconfidence.com). Tel: +44(0)114 3049648.

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