



Do we each have a voice that counts?

**The Guardian Service's response to the NHS staff survey
results 2024**

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Foreword

The NHS Staff Survey provides valuable insight into what the NHS workforce is thinking and feeling. Perception measures such as these are key to assessing how open NHS culture is. They provide better insight into whether there is a positive culture of speaking up than simply measuring how many cases Guardians handle, how many grievances are submitted, or how many safety incidents are reported - these measure activity, not whether staff feel able to speak up. Staff survey measures, however, are a measure of confidence and trust and we always want these to be high, irrespective of the number of speaking up cases that are recorded.

As usual, we awaited the results of the latest NHS staff survey with a sense of curiosity and optimism. Unfortunately, as we experienced last year, we found our optimism was unfounded. The indicators we have looked at have barely shifted and overall are, once more, slightly down on previous years.

We can only reach one conclusion – things must change. The same approach, the same narrative, the same direction, will inevitably lead to the same results.

The Guardian Service's call for change

The NHS Staff Survey has repeatedly told us that current efforts to open up NHS culture, to improve speaking up, and to create an environment where everyone truly believes that they have a voice that counts are failing. We are therefore calling for three actions to generate the change that is needed. These changes are necessary because failure to act is tacit acceptance that the voice of NHS workers does not really matter. The Guardian Service is calling for three bold actions:

- Local NHS employers and system leaders must be freed to put in place speaking up arrangements that meet the needs of their workforce and that deliver meaningful change. National direction is currently failing them.
- Recognition you do not change hearts, minds or culture through national initiatives that ignore the reality of the frontline and mandatory e-learning that focusses on process rather than empowerment.

- Professionalisation of the Guardian role so that it is taken seriously, invested in, and accepted as a specialist role that cannot be bolted on to someone's already over-stretched job description. The conflict that arises from the appointment of internal Guardians must be acknowledged.

To deliver these actions, there must be:

- A new narrative around speaking up
- A new approach to training
- The proper implementation of the Guardian role.

A new narrative around speaking up

Speaking up and listening are not two steps in a linear process. They represent an interaction between two parties. Speaking up is not the domain of some parts of the workforce (usually those on the frontline) with listening being left to middle management and the ultimate response being the responsibility of senior leaders. Describing speaking up, listening up and following up as a process is, fundamentally, wrong. Focusing on prescribed actions for particular staff groups is disempowering and leads to conflict and accusation. Whilst this continues, the story will remain that some parties aren't speaking up when they ought whilst others are not listening when they should. Everyone is blamed and tragedies continue to happen.

Our solution is a shift in how speaking up is described and we have developed our 'Dialogue' model to create that shift. This describes speaking up, listening up, and following up as an interaction, not a process. It acknowledges the difficulties that make this apparently simple interaction not as simple as it should be, and the barriers presented by power imbalances, difference, and mindset. Importantly, it does not divide the workforce into those who speak and those who listen. It brings people together, recognising the important role we all play, encouraging mutual support and, above all, empowering everyone to take action themselves.

A new approach to training

Mandatory e-learning does not change mindsets or win hearts and minds. National training on speaking up has been available for some time, has been widely adopted, and completed countless times (43,148 times in 2023/24 according to National Guardian's Office figures). However, it has not delivered any discernible impact. Whilst we understand that one way of recognising the importance of something like speaking up is to introduce mandatory training as a way of demonstrating commitment, the result is simply a tick-box process. Ironically, mandatory e-learning can give the message that an organisation is paying lip-service to the concept rather than demonstrating genuine commitment.

Unfortunately, speaking up, and dialogue, is not about the simple passing on of information. It only happens when people believe in it, feel empowered, and work in an environment that welcomes it. E-learning rarely leaves anyone with a new sense of enthusiasm or opens up mindsets if they are already closed.

We are calling for e-learning to be replaced with face-to-face training that practices what it preaches by enabling in-person dialogue. Our Dialogue Workshops can be rolled out at scale, enabling culture to be reset and reigniting belief in speaking up where the concept has become stale, and people feel jaded. Our Dialogue Masterclasses are specifically designed for middle and senior managers who, so often, become seen as blockers but, in practice, face particular barriers of their own. They are intensive sessions that leave behind a cohort for change that can drive improvement at the team and organisational level.

The proper implementation of the Guardian role

The Guardian role should be invested in and carried out properly. Guardians are not 'just' there to take cases. They are an ally and a critical friend that works in partnership across an organisation to encourage action to improve culture. They need time to do this. They need to be able to act independently and free of conflict. They need to be able to challenge and support in equal measure.

The network of Guardians has grown beyond what was originally imagined (over 1,200 according to National Guardian's Office figures) - and the quality of how the role is performed varies hugely. Overall, if five years' worth of staff survey figures are the measure of the impact the national network of Guardians has had, it has been negligible. This is not

a criticism of the dedication of in-house Guardians, but a recognition that the dial has not shifted, and staff retention and wellbeing remain a significant issue across the healthcare sector.

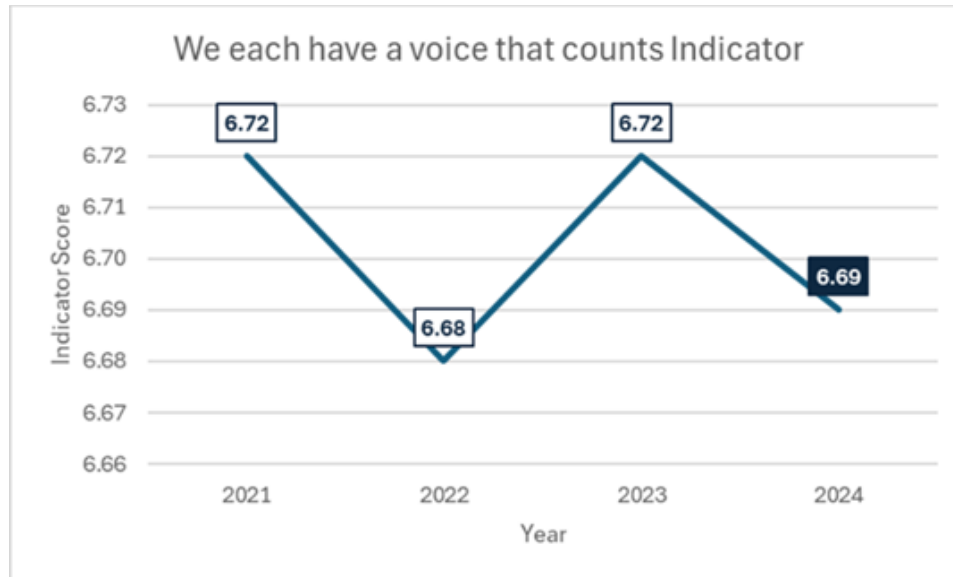
We know the Guardian role can be carried out successfully - and more cost effectively - as an independent resource. In fact, this model is the only way to overcome the conflict and other obstacles that implementing the role from within brings. We also know increased system working brings opportunities to improve the quality and consistency of the role, as well as offering efficiencies and economies of scale. Yet, nationally, the direction has been towards 'more' is better and efforts to support Guardians and ensure quality of service have come to nothing. Activity has become a proxy for outcomes.

We encourage all NHS organisations to critically appraise their arrangements and, if they aren't showing a discernible trend of ongoing improvement in how staff think and feel, then consider an alternative, independent approach. Guardian Service Guardians are professional, specialist, and dedicated in the support they give to everyone across our client base. Just as organisations and leadership merge, and efficiencies of scale are being sought as system-working takes shape, our Guardian services are ideally suited to working across organisational barriers. They can do so independently, without conflict, ensuring cases are escalated to where they need to go, information is shared, and lessons are learnt but confidentiality is not breached.

This approach can work equally well for the growing trend of formal and informal groupings of hospital trusts and also across Integrated Care Systems and their multi-site, multi-ownership primary care and other service providers.

What the survey says

We each have a voice that counts



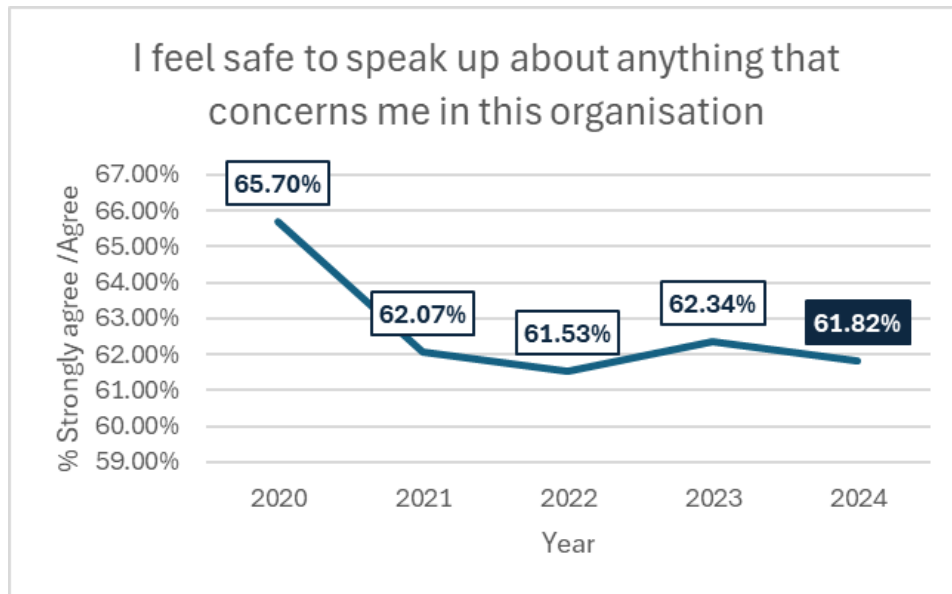
Year	'We each have a voice that counts' indicator
2021	6.72
2022	6.68
2023	6.72
2024	6.69

The measure of the 'we each have a voice that counts' People Promise is a compound indicator, drawing on the results of 11 different questions that relate to 'autonomy and control' and 'raising concerns'. These include the four questions looked at in more detail later in this report. We have previously found a relationship between this indicator, Guardian case numbers, and CQC rating which shows that where there is confidence in speaking up, having concerns addressed, trust and involvement in decision making (as reflected in this indicator), fewer cases are raised with Guardians and service quality is better.

Overall, this indicator has changed little since it was introduced in 2021 and is down on the previous year. This underlines our key message that current efforts are not having a

positive impact and, given the relationship between what staff say in the survey and CQC measures of quality, they are not having a positive impact for patients either. Change is needed.

I feel safe to speak up about anything that concerns me in this organisation



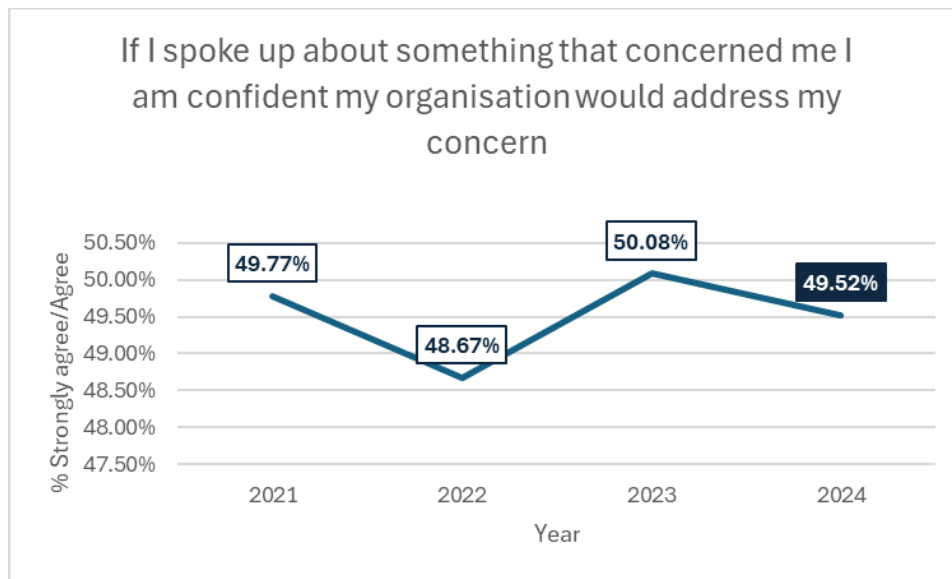
Year	% Agree or strongly agree
2020	65.70%
2021	62.07%
2022	61.53%
2023	62.34%
2024	61.82%

Only 3 in 5 (61.82%) respondents to the survey agree or strongly agree with the statement that they ‘feel safe to speak up about anything that concerns me in this organisation’. This is similar to last year though indicates a slight decline (0.52 of a percentage point) and is 3.88 percentage points lower than when this was first measured in 2020.

If national efforts were going to make any difference it would have been seen in this measure of staff confidence. This result suggests, in fact, that a positive difference is not being made despite, for instance, the nationally designed e-learning package on speaking up being completed 43,148 times during 2023/24. This is also despite what appears to be an ever-growing number of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians (686 new Guardians were

trained in 2023/24 alone). As set out above, a change is needed and this needs to be more than merely iterative. Repeated calls for the mandating of existing e-learning packages are not the solution.

If I spoke up about something that concerned me, I am confident my organisation would address my concern



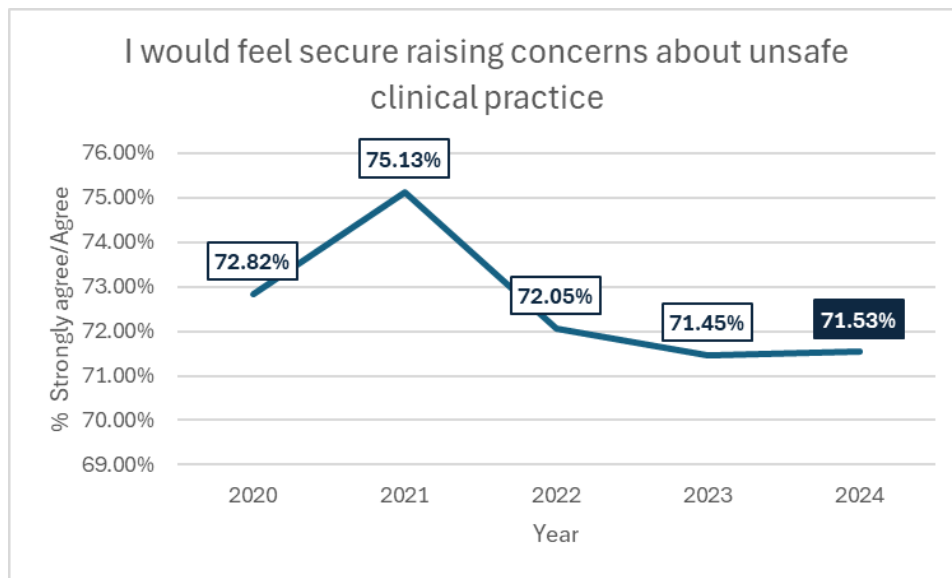
Year	% Agree or strongly agree
2021	49.77%
2022	48.67%
2023	50.08%
2024	49.52%

It is worth pausing to reflect on the difference between feeling safe to speak up and feeling confident that what is raised would be addressed. This year the proportion of respondents who say that they are confident in something being addressed is 12.3 percentage points lower than the proportion who feel safe to raise a concern. This figure is always lower and, arguably, always will be as even when a concern is raised and the point made is addressed, the resolution is not always visible or communicated well. Indeed, in some cases, there may simply be a difference of opinion between those who raise a concern believing that action is taken, and those who say they are taking that action. Nevertheless, the discrepancy is stark, and we believe results, at least in part, from the current narrative around speaking up which encourages issues to be ‘passed on’ rather than empowers

those raising them to be part of the solution. The process that is currently described creates a disconnect between the raising of an issue and its resolution with the layers involved too often cutting people out and leaving them feeling isolated, vulnerable, and unaware of what it is going on. This then leads to the sense that speaking up is a futile exercise creating a destructive, self-perpetuating, cycle.

As with other trends in the survey, the results for this indicator are down on the previous year and down on when measurements were first taken in 2020.

I would feel secure raising concerns about unsafe clinical practice



Year	% Agree or strongly agree
2020	72.82%
2021	75.13%
2022	72.05%
2023	71.45%
2024	71.53%

The proportion of staff agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement ‘I feel secure raising concerns about unsafe clinical practice’ has risen by only 0.08 of a percentage point compared to last year and is 1.29 percentage points lower than when this was first measured in 2020. Whilst feeling ‘secure’ to raise concerns specifically about unsafe clinical practice is, thankfully, at a higher level than feeling ‘safe’ to raise concerns about

‘anything’, the trend is still downwards. Worryingly, 8.78% of respondents actively disagree with this statement.

I am confident that my organisation would address my concern



Year	% Agree or strongly agree
2020	60.57%
2021	59.51%
2022	56.76%
2023	56.87%
2024	56.83%

The proportion of staff agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement ‘I am confident that my organisation would address my concern [about unsafe clinical practice]’ has fallen slightly compared to the previous year and is 3.75 percentage points lower than when it was first measured in 2020. The familiar discrepancy between raising a concern and feeling confident that it would be addressed is apparent. This year there is a 14.7 percentage point difference between the two – running higher than the difference between ‘safety’ in speaking up about ‘anything’ and ‘confidence’ in having that concern addressed. Creating a culture where the safety of services is protected must be front and centre of all activity across the health sector. The raising of concerns about safety, and having confidence that those concerns are addressed, is a fundamental aspect of this. Yet staff

are telling us that things are getting worse. There can be no clearer indicator that national efforts, and the direction in which they have been led, are simply not good enough.

To find out more

To learn more about the Guardian Service, our ‘Dialogue’ model, our workshops and masterclasses, and how we can support organisations and systems with our independent Guardian services, contact us at:

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National and local results for the NHS staff survey 2024 can be found here:

<https://www.nhsstaffsurveys.com/results/national-results/>