



August 2024- 31 March 2025



**The Guardian
Service**
Here to listen

Circulation:

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Guardian
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1. Executive summary

The Guardian Service Limited (GSL) began providing the Freedom to Speak Up Service for the East of England Ambulance Service (EEAST) on the 5th August 2024. Between the period of 5th August 2024 and 31st March 2025, 164 concerns were raised by staff members.

The efforts by the Trust to help promote the implementation of The Guardian Service, as well as colleagues sharing positive experiences, and results of using the service contributed to the increased usage of this channel for speaking up.

The majority of staff chose to use the GSL, as they wanted impartial support or they had raised their concern before and felt they had not been listened to.

Concerns received are recorded by GSL against specific themes which are Management Issues, System & Process, Bullying & Harassment, Discrimination & Inequality, Behaviour & Relationship and Patient Safety/Quality and Worker Safety.

The top 2 job groups raising concerns were Additional Clinical Services (50) and Allied Health Professionals (38).

The 3 most common themes for new cases were System & Process (68), Behaviour & Relationships (32) and Management Issues (29).

There were 4 cases raised that were specifically relating to Patient Safety. However, it is important to note that there were cases recorded under other themes that had the potential to indirectly impact on the quality of patient care and safety.

Norfolk & Waveney A&E Operations were the directorate with the highest number of concerns. This should not be viewed negatively, but as encouragement that staff are comfortable to speak up.

No staff member reported that they suffered a detriment because of speaking up.

There are a number of recommendations detailed at the end of this report that the Trust is asked to consider. These relate to various training, improvements on communication, the duration of formal processes, the use of freedom to speak up Champions, and skill mix within frontline services.

2. 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.

3. 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 EEAST 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 East of England Ambulance Service Trust's Board to promote and comply with the NGO national reporting requirements.

The GSL was implemented in the East of England Ambulance Service (EEAST) on the 5th August 2024.

Communication and marketing have been achieved by meeting 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.

4. 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 EEAST employees and are external to the Trust.

5. 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

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

White	No discernible risk to organisation.	No organisational response required
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For this date period, all escalated cases were responded to within the agreed RAG protocols.

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. As 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.

6. Purpose of the paper

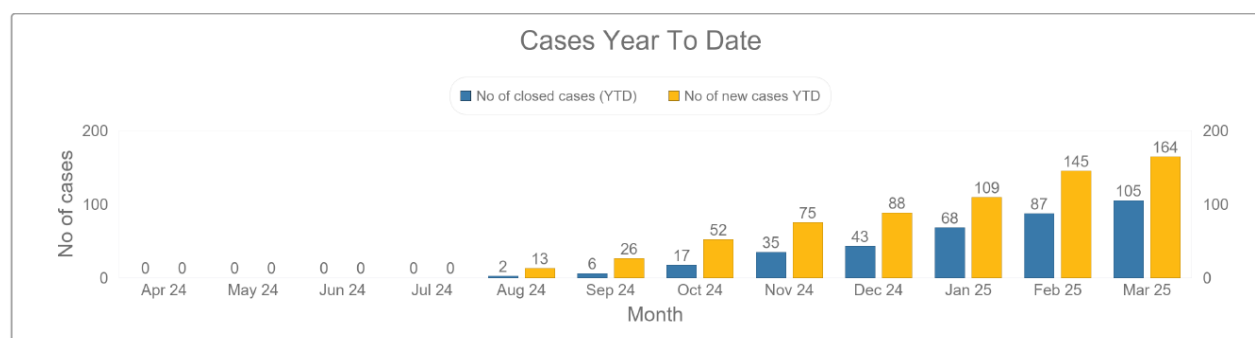
The purpose of this paper is to detail the progress and development of the Speak Up service within EEAST and to identify learning from the themes arising from the cases received by the Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

This report provides an overview of themes and issues raised through the Guardian Service from 5th August 2024 to 31st March 2025. The report also sets out some learning points and makes recommendations for consideration.

The report follows the guidance from the NGO on the content FTSU Guardians should include when reporting to their Board which include Assessment of cases, Action taken to improve speaking-up culture and Recommendations.

7. Number of concerns raised

From 5th August 2024 – 31st March 2025, 164 concerns were raised to The Guardian Service.



Since the service went live within East of England Ambulance Trust, monthly calls received have steadily increase. Over the past 8 months the average number of concerns raised is 21.

By the 31st of March 2025, 59 cases remained open and 105 have been closed.

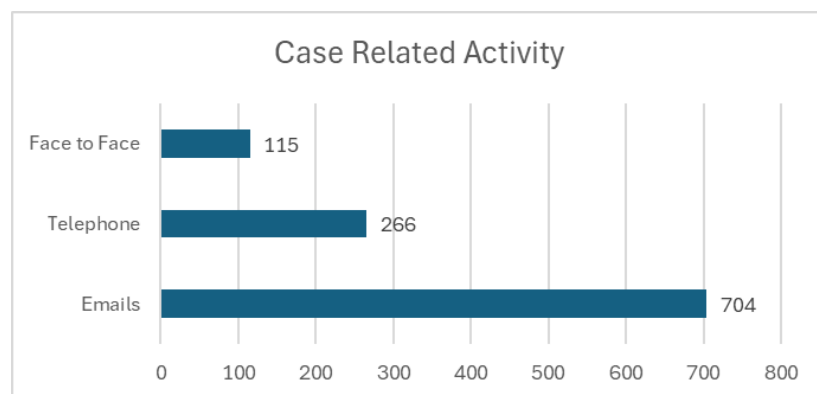
Open cases are continually monitored, and regular contact is maintained by the Guardians. Where there is a particular complex case, setbacks or avoidable delays in the progress of cases that have been escalated, these would be discussed with the Chief of Staff at regular monthly meetings.

Escalated cases are cases which are referred to the most appropriate person in the trust, at the request of the staff member, who could take action. The Guardians always encourages the staff member to escalate to their manager in the first instance, however this may not always be the most appropriate action for them. If this is the case, the Guardians can support them to escalate higher.

45% of staff members preferred to keep their concern confidential and for the Guardians not to escalate to the trust. 28% of staff members were happy for their concern to be escalated with their name. The remaining 27% wished to raise their concerns anonymously or without using their name.

The number of emails, telephone calls (including text messages) and face to face visits engaged by the Guardians in responding to concerns are as follows:

- Emails: 704 (65%)
- Telephone: 266 (24%)
- Face to Face: 115 (11%)



There are often multiple contact points for every concern raised, therefore the numbers do not directly correlate with the number of concerns raised.

8. Confidentiality

The way in which cases are managed by The Guardian Service with respect to confidentiality and escalation routes is recorded cumulatively. A breakdown of this data covering the period of 5th August 2024 to 31st March 2025 is provided below;

Confidentiality	No. of concerns	Percentage
Keep it confidential within Guardian Service remit	74	45.12%

Permission to escalate with name	46	28.05%
Permission to escalate anonymously	22	13.41%
Permission to escalate without name	22	13.41%
Total	164	

Within this reporting period, just over 45% of staff members asked for their concern to be kept confidential with The Guardian Service. 28% of staff members asked for their concern to be escalated with their name.

9. Themes

Concerns raised are broken down into the following categories;

Theme	Total
A Patient and Service User Safety / Quality	4
B Management Issue	29
C System Process	68
D Bullying and Harassment	13
E Discrimination / Inequality	6
F Behavioural / Relationship	32
G Other (Describe)	1
H Worker Safety	11
Total Concerns	164



10. Assessment of Themes

System & Process

This was the highest reported concern with 68 concerns raised in relation to this theme. Examples as described by staff:

- Inconsistent actions identified by staff members on the recruitment processes. Recruitment policies and practices not being adhered to by middle management.
- Staff members feel there is inequitable candidate consideration during recruitment processes.
- Discussions on the possible non-compliance with workplace relationships and professional boundaries.
- Staff members feel the training opportunities are not evenly distributed or afforded to all.
- Insufficient allocation of time for mandatory training and required certifications.
- Perception of inadequate support, understanding and communication during formal proceedings.
- Staff members feel there is limited transparency regarding process timelines and expected outcomes during formal processes.
- Staff members sense insufficient access to trauma-informed support resources and other services.
- Possible gaps in psychological safety provisions for staff experiencing challenges.

Behavioural / Relationship

32 concerns were reported in relation to this theme. Examples as described by staff:

- Reports of breakdown in communication amongst staff members of the similar or same banding.
- Gender-based inappropriate commentary reported across various organisational levels.
- A reduction in professional respect observed in peer to peer and hierarchical relationships.
- Unwanted and unauthorised sharing of staff members personal issues and information without consent or done so in an unprofessional manner.
- Potential breaches in confidentiality regarding sensitive information in group settings.
- Management communications in public forums falling below expected professional standards.
- Reports of behaviours perceived as intimidating amongst colleagues.
- Deviations from Trust values and expected conduct during virtual collaborations.
- Unauthorised recording of colleagues raising privacy concerns internally.

Management Issue

29 concerns were raised in relation to this theme. Examples as described by staff:

- Perceived unfair treatment of staff members by management.
- Inconsistent adherence to established procedures.
- Knowledge gaps identified regarding Trust protocols and procedural requirements.
- Insufficient outreach and wellbeing monitoring during staff absences and formal proceedings.

- Inadequate reintegration support for staff members, following extended leave periods.
- Perceived disconnect between acknowledgment and meaningful follow-up actions after a concern is raised internally.
- Reported inadequacies in addressing safety matters raised by staff members.
- Instances of Gender-based inappropriate conduct from those in leadership positions.
- Reports of communications perceived as undermining professional dignity.
- Staff members felt that they had been negatively treated by managers.

Bullying and Harassment

13 concerns were raised in relation to this theme. Examples as described by staff:

- Reported undermining of professional dignity and psychological safety.
- Implementation of actions by management perceived as lacking clear justification.
- Interpersonal conduct between peers failing to meet trust standards.
- Reported patterns of diminishing communications among staff members affecting workplace morale
- Inappropriate interactions between colleagues across various levels within the trust.
- Behaviours potentially breached on respectful workplace policies.

Patient Safety / Quality

4 concerns were raised in relation to this theme. Examples of concerns described by staff:

- Potential compromise in supervision protocols for critical care situations.
- Alleged instances of non-compliance with management requests with regards to care quality standards.
- Professional conduct concerns with possible implications for patients and service users.
- Potential limitations in specific transport vehicles relating to weight capacity.

Discrimination / Inequality

6 concerns were raised in relation to this theme. Examples concerns described by staff:

- Instances of exclusion and unfair treatment due to cultural identity, traditions or heritage.
- Potential barriers faced by staff members with neurodiverse conditions. Lack of understanding or unequal treatment within the workplace.
- Perceived unjust treatment or denial of opportunities based on ethnicity.
- Disparities in access to development and training for career progression due to staff members physical location.

Worker Safety

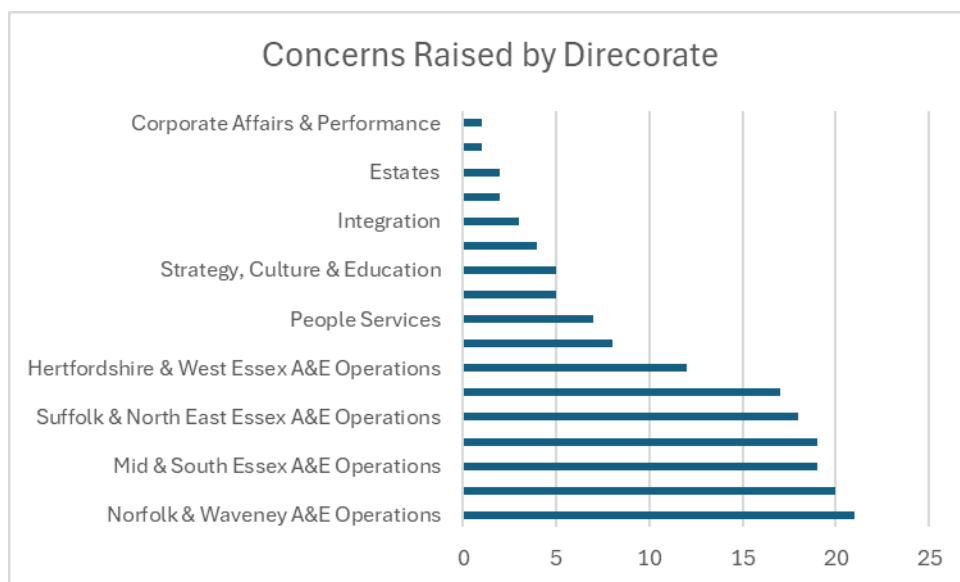
11 concerns were raised in relation to this theme.

The cases recorded under this theme included the following examples of concerns described by staff:

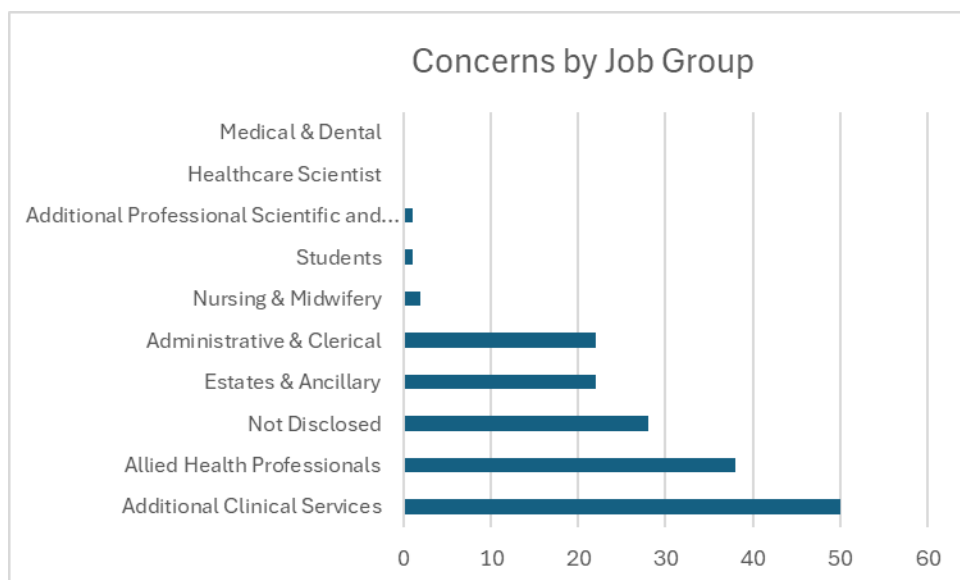
- Potential impact on staff members safety, wellbeing and comfort with regards to specific vehicles not being adequate for a person's height and weight.
- Compromised safety for staff members at certain work locations where members of the public can freely access the sites, potentially breaching safety measures.

11. Statistical Graphs

Concerns raised by Directorate

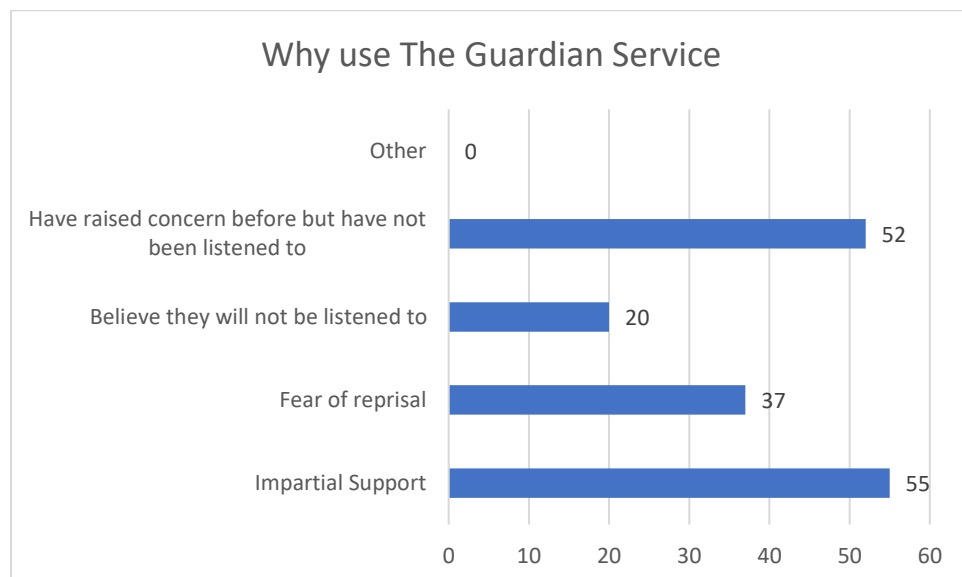


Concerns raised by Job Group



12. Why do staff use The Guardian Service?

Staff who make contact with The Guardian Service are routinely asked why they chose this route to raise a concern. The responses provided are demonstrated in the chart below;



13. Detriment

Although, there has been no report of detriment suffered as a result of speaking up through the Guardian Service channel, staff have reported previous instances of detriment that they feel has occurred as a result of speaking up directly to their manager or colleague. The Guardian Service encourages staff to speak up whilst maintaining that they will not suffer any detriment.

The Guardians observed that some staff members expressed significant concerns about potential identification. As a result, these individuals opted to remain anonymous in communications with the Guardian and demonstrated reluctance to share identifying information with the Trust.

Detriment is a major concern associated with speaking up and has a huge influence on FTSU culture. The Guardians will not close cases without approval of the staff member. The staff member is encouraged to keep the lines of communication open throughout their case and following closure and any perceived detriments should be advised to the Guardians.

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

- Monthly meetings with the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief of Staff to discuss the monthly activity reports which includes themes and outcome of cases. No individual can be identified by the discussion of themes therefore maintaining staff confidentiality.

- Quarterly meetings with the NED to discuss the monthly activity reports which includes themes and outcome of cases. No individual can be identified by the discussion of themes therefore maintaining staff confidentiality.
- The Guardians conduct walkabouts, visiting sites and stations to speak to staff about The Guardian Service and distribute promotional materials at different locations. The Guardians hold briefings with teams and attend meetings both in person and via Teams to talk about the service and encourage a culture of speaking up for all staff and managers.
- The Guardians have worked in collaboration with the EEAST Communications team to implement regular virtual drop in sessions to accommodate remote working staff members.
- The Guardians attend various staff inductions to promote of The Guardian Service.
- The Guardians attend both the Eastern regional meetings & NHS UK Ambulance Service meetings, workshops, events and conferences organised by the NGO. This, in addition to the NGO Bulletins, enables Guardians to keep abreast of developments in the field which in turn support the effective handling of concerns.
- The Guardians listen and supports staff to enable them to raise their own concerns. Exploring ideas and options for using existing tools, such as facilitated meetings, peer facilitation, considering content of e-mails to managers, verbal communication and preparation for staff attending facilitated or one to one meetings. All of which can help an individual bring about a resolution, without instigating formal grievance procedures.

15. Learning and Improvements

- There are cases where staff did not wish to escalate issues through GSL. Reasons for this are more complex than they appear as each person has different reasons for speaking to a Guardian. Staff conversations with the Guardians indicate work could be undertaken by the organisation to try and understand why employees feel they cannot escalate an issue internally and what the organisation could do to remove barriers to speaking up.
- Staff choose to speak up via the Guardians because they have raised concerns before but are not listened to and many believe the organisation will not take action. Confidence can be restored through promoting positive staff experiences of speaking up at work through all available speaking up routes within EEAST.
- The Guardians attend fortnightly “Listen and Learn” meetings with other FTSU Guardians within the Guardian Service where complex concerns are raised and discussed, and learning is embedded via shared good practices. Reflecting on practice informs continual learning. High levels of confidentiality are always maintained whilst in this setting.
- The Guardians role is complex, and the landscape is constantly evolving. To ensure best practice, the Guardians complete annual refresher training provided by the NGO to support learning and development needs on changes.

- The Guardians are Mental Health First Aiders. This is valuable when liaising with staff who may be experiencing poor mental health or at risk of self-harm. The skills learned enable the FTSU Guardian to signpost a person to appropriate support.

16. Comments & Recommendations

- After concerns have been raised to the Guardians relating to neurodiversity, the Trust may wish to consider enhancing neurodiversity awareness and skills for those who manage people so they can effectively understand, support and engage the neurodivergent staff members.
- The FTSU Guardians encourage the trust to use and share the reflection and planning tool. This guide has 3 stages and is designed to help you identify strengths in yourself, your leadership team and your organisation. This should be used alongside Freedom to speak up and promoting the Guardian Service.
- The FTSU Guardian encourages the Trust to embed Speaking up further by making it mandatory for all staff to complete the 'Freedom to Speak Up in Healthcare' modules - *Speak Up*, *Listen Up* and *Follow Up*, introduced by the NGO.
 - 1. Speak Up** covers what speaking up is and why it matters. It helps staff understand how they can speak up and what to expect.
 - 2. Listen Up** focuses on listening to concerns and understanding the barriers to speaking up. It helps Managers to understand what speaking up is and how they should respond when someone speaks up to them.
 - 3. Follow Up** was developed for senior leaders throughout healthcare – including executive and non-executive directors, lay members and governors. The module aims to promote a consistent and effective Freedom to Speak Up culture across the system, which enables workers to speak up and be confident they will be listened to and action taken.
- On several occasions, staff have expressed that when they have raised informal concerns, the time taken by the Trust to address these issues has been lengthy, with insufficient updates provided and lack of communication from managers. It may be beneficial to consider implementing a more timely response process, with managers ensuring that the staff member who raised the concern receives regular updates throughout the resolution process.
- The Guardian Service has received several concerns regarding Employee Relations (ER) cases and the prolonged duration of these processes. Issues highlighted include delays in appointing an investigating officer, which can take 2-3 weeks, as well as a lack of regular updates for staff involved in these cases. Staff have expressed that they are not receiving updates as frequently as they should. The extended timelines for such processes can have a significant negative impact on staff wellbeing and mental health.

- Designated welfare officers serve as liaisons for staff undergoing these processes, particularly when employees have made repeated requests for updates and have received little, or no response. This responsibility may create additional strain on welfare officers. The Guardian Service recommends providing comprehensive support and training for these individuals, such as mental health first aid certification. Additionally, we propose extending the "Speak Up, Listen Up & Follow Up" sessions currently recommended for management and leadership to include welfare officers as well
- To foster an open culture within the Trust, the guardians visit various sites, stations, and control rooms to engage with staff and address any questions regarding the Freedom to Speak Up initiative. Conversations with staff reveal that many, particularly frontline operational staff, are unaware of the Trust's transition to an external provider or who their designated Guardians are. While the Guardians will continue to meet with and brief staff at all locations, the Trust could support these efforts by encouraging managers to ensure their teams are informed about the identity of their Guardians and how to contact them if needed. Additionally, it may be beneficial for managers to invite Guardians to attend team meetings and briefings to further facilitate communication and awareness.
- The Trust maintains a network of Freedom to Speak Up Champions who promote the Freedom to Speak Up initiative and direct staff to the Guardian Service. The Trust may wish to consider how they want to engage with their champions and invest additional resources to enhance support for these Champions.
- The Trust may wish to review the skill mix within response vehicles. Concerns have been raised regarding crews that are either double paramedic-led, multiple emergency medical technician-led, or double emergency care assistant-led. Staff are expressing concerns about the potential impact on patient care, particularly in situations where the highest level of clinician is not available for Emergency and even Urgent Care responses. Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and Emergency Care Assistants (ECAs) lack access to certain medications and advanced skills that are critical in providing comprehensive care. This issue is further compounded by delays in paramedic backup availability due to hospital constraints, which can result in patients not receiving the appropriate level of care for their condition.
- Management Training – "Speak up, Listen up, Follow up" is a training session created for all who have supervisory or leadership roles or responsibilities. It's been identified that there are some leaders within the trust that possibly have limited knowledge to assist them to be people-managers. This support can be provided by the Guardian service in addition to the primary Guardian duties. The Trust should be aware that GSL will provide two complementary Dialogue training master class sessions for senior leaders to support this recommendation.

- Additionally, there is also the offer of two further complementary taster session workshops aimed at Local Operations Managers and Local Area Managers understanding the concept of listening up. These training sessions will be delivered by our Director of Strategy along with support from our Guardian team.

17. Staff Feedback

Positive comments that staff have fed back to the Guardians have included:

- I was upset - spoke to the Guardian and immediately felt that I had someone that was not judging - but listening , which at that moment is exactly what I needed
- Was a great help and really professional. I would recommend and use this service again if needed
- The Guardian was 110% professional and listened to everything i had to say about the staff member that I was referring. A very high standard of confidentiality
- I will speak to the Guardian Service in the future about any problem that may come up.
- It allowed me to clear my conscience to be satisfied my concerns had been raised and heard at a high level.
- Swift, confidential easy process
- Brilliant service, easy to access and concerns were managed well
-
- The Guardian was kind, compassionate and kept me updated throughout
- I had been dealing with this issue for months with no resolution, within 2 weeks of calling it had been sorted. I'm incredibly grateful for this service and Kym
- It was really helpful, really appreciate it! Keep up the good work!

- The Guardian was amazing, made me feel comfortable and reassured my when I expressed concerns that I shouldn't have called as was feeling guilt for getting to that point
- Once the Guardian Service was involved in my case, things moved forward. They were the most helpful out of everyone involved.
- Kim was great! She made me feel comfortable talking to her and was reassuring, as I was super nervous about speaking up. Thanks for all your help Kim!