

REPORT TO BOARD OF DIRECTORS (BoD)

Report title: Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) – Six Month Report

Meeting date: 4 December 2025

Board sponsor: Norman Blissett, Chief People Officer (CPO)

Paper Author: The Guardian Service

Appendices:

Appendix 1: FTSU – Six Month Report (1 April 2025 – 30 September 2025)

Executive summary:

Action required:	Discussion (report to be taken as read for the purpose of discussion)
Purpose of the Report:	<p>This report is submitted to the Board to provide oversight of the concerns being raised through the FTSU Guardian service. It supports the Board in promoting a culture of openness and transparency across the organisation.</p> <p>The report aims to inform the Board of the nature, volume, and themes of cases raised, and to highlight any emerging trends, areas of concern, or potential organisational learning. It also provides assurance on how cases are being managed and the level of staff engagement with the FTSU process.</p>
Summary of key issues:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 81 cases raised year to date (YTD): 19 cases remain open. Key themes include management issues, behaviour/relationship issues and system/process problems. 45.68% of staff sought impartial support, 35.80% had raised their concern previously but felt they had not been listened to, 13.58% felt a fear of reprisal, 3.70% believed they would not be listened to and 1.23% - Other. No reports of detriment; however, training needs for some managers were identified, particularly around assertiveness and handling concerns effectively. There is a geographical spread across key hospital sites, with the William Harvey Hospital (WHH) Care Group having the highest number of cases (31) followed by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital (QEQM) (22) and Kent and Canterbury Hospital (K&C) (17). 45.68% of staff requested to keep their concern confidential, 24.69% gave permission to escalate with their name, 18.52% gave permission to raise anonymously and 11.11% wanted their concern escalated without their name. Some cases remain open due to ongoing investigations or staff choosing not to proceed.



Key recommendations:	<p>The Board of Directors is asked to NOTE the emerging themes and to support consideration of any future training or cultural development, particularly where line managers are consistently identified in FTSU concerns.</p> <p>A key recommendation is that the Board of Directors continues to reinforce the importance of FTSU across all levels of leadership, particularly middle management. Staff frequently report that leadership style, communication, and day-to-day management behaviours influence their willingness to raise concerns. Additional development in behavioural leadership, conflict resolution, and managing difficult conversations would further support consistent practice and help address recurring themes.</p> <p>Visibility of senior leaders remains important to staff. Many reported that they would value a more regular presence on wards and departments, with opportunities to discuss operational pressures and local concerns directly. Increased leadership visibility across all sites would help build trust, strengthen communication, and support early identification of emerging issues.</p> <p>It is also recommended that the Trust continues to strengthen the working relationship between the FTSU Guardians and the Employee Relations (ER) team. A cohesive and collaborative approach helps ensure that processes are aligned, staff receive consistent guidance, and concerns can be addressed in a timely and supportive manner.</p> <p>The Board of Directors is assured that the FTSU process remains visible and accessible and is encouraged to support ongoing leadership development where recurring themes indicate a need.</p>
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Implications:

Links to Strategic Theme:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and Safety • Patients • People • Partnerships • Sustainability
Link to the Trust Risk Register:	Risks identified through the FTSU process and escalated by the Guardian are reviewed and, where relevant, recorded on the Trust Risk Register for appropriate oversight and action.
Resource:	N
Legal and regulatory:	Y – Mandated to give all NHS staff access to a FTSU Guardian.
Subsidiary:	Y – The FTSU Guardian service is delivered by an external supplier under contract.

Assurance route:

Previously considered by: N/A



East Kent Hospitals University 
NHS Foundation Trust

Six Month Report
01st April 2025 to 30th September 2025



Circulation: East Kent Hospitals University Foundation Trust.

Main point of contact:
Norman Blisset – norman.blissett@nhs.net
Louise Goldup -louisegoldup@nhs.net

Prepared by: Peter Dean and Laura Geraghty

The Guardian Service Ltd.

Date: 01/11/2025

Contents

1. Executive summary.....	2
2. Purpose of the paper	3
3. Background to Freedom to Speak Up	3
4. The Guardian Service	3
5. Access and Independence	4
6. Categorisation of Calls and Agreed Escalation Timescales.....	4
7. Number of concerns raised	5
8. Confidentiality	5
9. Themes	5
10. Assessment of Cases	7
11. Statistical Graphs	8
12. Why do staff use The Guardian Service?	9
13. Detriment.....	10
14. Action taken to improve the Freedom to Speak Up Culture.....	10
15. Learning and Improvements	11
16. Comments & Recommendations	11
17. Staff Feedback.....	12

1. Executive summary

This six-month reporting period covers 1st April to 30th September 2025.

During the period 1st April to 30th September 2025, a total of 81 staff concerns were raised through the Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) Guardian Service. Staff engagement has continued to increase month-on-month, reflecting growing awareness of the service and confidence in its independence and accessibility. Nineteen cases remain open, with others having been closed following support, guidance, or appropriate escalation.

Many cases were raised by workers across a wide range of clinical and non-clinical areas, demonstrating that staff at all levels of the Trust feel able to speak up. A smaller number were raised by managers, senior leaders, or where the staff group was not disclosed.

Behaviour and Relationships and Management Issues remained the most common primary themes during this period. These were frequently accompanied by additional concerns relating to Bullying and Harassment, System and Process issues, and, in some cases, Discrimination or Inequality.

Bullying and Harassment concerns often overlapped with behavioural and interpersonal issues, with staff reporting experiences such as intimidating language, inappropriate behaviour, perceived unfair treatment, or breakdowns in communication. Examples included raised voices, dismissive interactions, and strained team dynamics.

Several staff raised concerns relating to Discrimination or Inequality, either as a primary or secondary theme. These included perceived unfairness in rota or annual leave allocation, concerns about recruitment processes, and issues connected to nationality or disability.

Management Issues continued to feature prominently, with staff citing concerns about leadership style, communication, management of change, clarity of direction, and the ability of managers to address team-level issues effectively.

Concerns relating to Systems and Processes were also common, particularly during periods of organisational change. Staff reported delays in responses, inconsistent communication during formal processes, and insufficient support when navigating complex procedures. Several of these cases were escalated to senior leaders for further review.

Across the reporting period, service visibility remained a key priority. Guardians attended meetings, briefings, site visits and engagement events across all Trust locations, ensuring that staff were aware of how to access confidential support. This continued promotion has helped to embed the FTSU function and build a more open, transparent culture.

The Trust's timely responses to escalated concerns, along with its ongoing promotion of Freedom to Speak Up, have contributed positively to staff confidence, encouraging an environment where employees feel safe, supported and listened to when raising issues.

2. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this six-monthly report is to supplement the monthly and cumulative numerical reports by giving mid-year insight to the progress and development of the service and a summary of the themes arising from the cases received by the Guardian at this point. The report provides an overview for the six months 1 April 2025 to 30th September 2025. The report follows the guidance from the National Guardian Office (NGO) on the content Guardians should include when reporting to their Board: Assessment of cases; Potential patient 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 East Kent Hospitals 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 East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust's Board to promote and comply with the NGO national reporting requirements.

The Guardian Service Ltd (GSL) was implemented in East Kent Hospitals University Foundation Trust on 17th March 2025.

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.

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

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 NHS employees and are external to the East Kent Hospitals Trust

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. This ensures ongoing support is provided where needed. Contact may be via follow-up phone calls and/or face-to-face meetings, particularly for staff who feel unable to escalate an issue for fear of reprisal. Guardians will continue to maintain contact until the situation is resolved, or the staff member confirms that no further action is required.

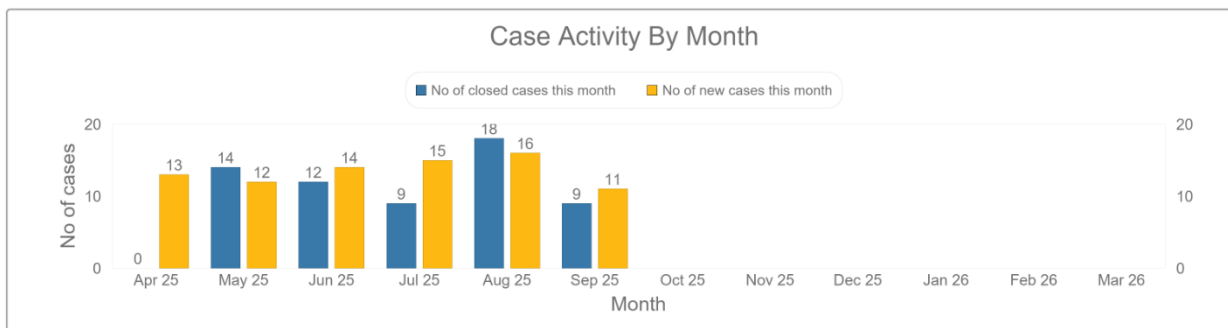
Where a case is particularly complex, or where there are setbacks or avoidable delays in the progress of an escalated case, these issues are raised with the organisational lead for the Guardian Service at the regular monthly meetings.

Escalated cases are those referred to an appropriate manager, at the request of the employee, to ensure appropriate action can be taken. As not all employees want their manager to know they have contacted the Guardian Service, some choose to progress the matter themselves or take no further action. There are also circumstances in which cases are escalated later by the Guardian, once the staff member has had time to consider their options and decide on the most suitable course of action. In such cases, the Guardian will keep the case open and continue to offer support.

In a small number of situations, contact with the Guardian is not maintained by the staff member.

7. Number of concerns raised

Staff at EKHUFT can use a variety of routes to raise concerns. e.g. Datix, meetings, managers and HR teams. This report is limited to concerns raised via The Guardian Service. During the period 1st April to 30th September 2025, a total of 81 new concerns were raised through The Guardian Service, of which 62 of those cases were closed. The monthly distribution of cases over the period is below.



The NGO report that FTSU in general across the NHS has seen a steady annual increase in staff members raising concerns through FTSU Guardians. The Guardian Service is now beginning to become embedded in East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust. Staff often mention to the Guardian that the independent status of The Guardian Service helped them to feel safe and more motivated to speak up. This was particularly important for staff who wished to raise concerns anonymously. These factors, along with regular and varied promotional activities may be partly influencing the healthy increase in numbers of concerns being raised.

8. Confidentiality

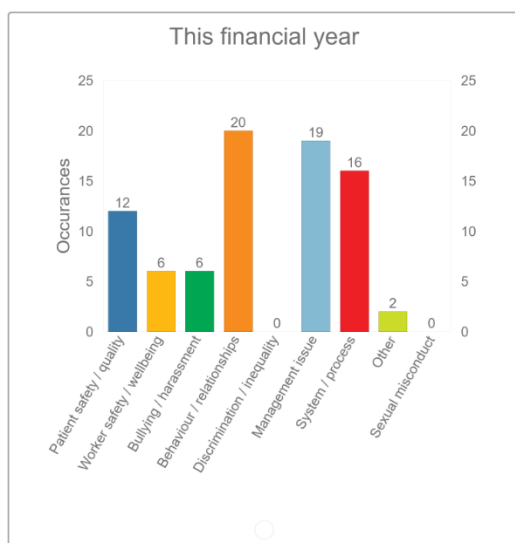
Confidentiality	No. of concerns	Percentage
Keep it confidential within Guardian Service remit	37	45.68%
Permission to escalate with names	20	24.69%
Permission to escalate anonymously	15	18.52%
Permission to escalate without name	9	11.11%
Total	81	100%

9. Themes

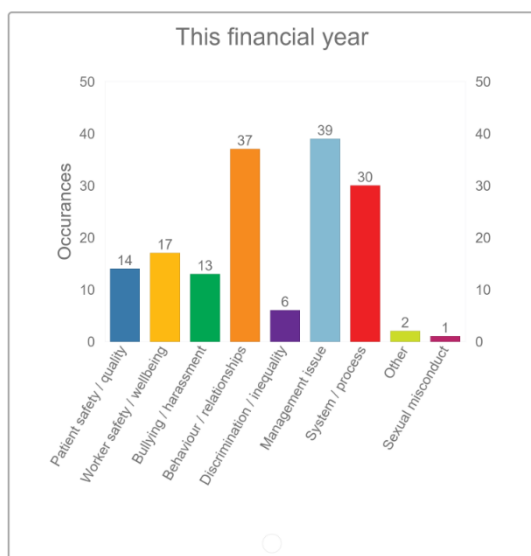
Concerns raised are broken down into the following categories:

Theme	Total
A Patient and Service User Safety / Quality	12
B Management Issue	19
C System Process	16
D Bullying and Harassment	6
E Discrimination / Inequality	6
F Behavioural / Relationship	20
G Other (Describe)	1
H Worker Safety	1
Grand Total	81

Primary Theme Year to Date.



Multi Theme Occurrences Year-to-Date



10.Trends in cases

The number of cases raised at the Trust continues to increase, indicating that staff are aware of the service and feel safe to speak up. It is also worth noting that several staff approached the Guardian informally during briefings and drop-in sessions and, after discussion, chose not to raise a formal concern. These informal conversations still enable The Guardian Service to identify emerging trends across areas alongside the formal reporting.

During the April to September reporting period, concerns were raised across a broad range of clinical and non-clinical settings, with noticeable activity in several high-pressure operational areas. These concerns came from staff at all levels, reflecting wide engagement with the service across multiple directorates.

The themes within these concerns align with those set out in Section 11 of this report, particularly Behaviour and Relationships, Management Issues, and System and Process. Each case has been managed in accordance with the staff member's wishes and the level of confidentiality requested, ensuring that staff feel supported and able to speak up safely.

11. Assessment of Cases

Of the **81 cases** raised between **1st April and 30th September 2025**, the majority were raised by workers (**72**), with additional concerns from managers (**12**) and senior leaders (**9**). A further **5** staff members did not disclose their staff group. This reflects strong engagement with the service from a wide range of roles, bandings and directorates across the Trust, not solely within clinical areas.

Behaviour and Relationships

20 cases had a *primary* theme of Behaviour and Relationships. Many of these were multifaceted, with bullying, harassment, system and process issues frequently recorded as additional themes. Examples of concerns raised include:

- Inappropriate behaviour following a breakdown in a personal relationship with a colleague
- Use of inappropriate or unprofessional language
- Aggressive or angry behaviour from colleagues
- Senior colleagues being dismissive or unsupportive
- Breaches of confidentiality, including gossiping about staff

Discrimination and Inequality

6 cases had a primary theme of Discrimination or Inequality, with a further number recorded as secondary themes. Concerns raised included:

- Perceived unfairness in rota or annual leave allocation impacting wellbeing and work/life balance
- Issues related to protected characteristics
- Concerns about fairness in recruitment processes
- Feeling treated differently due to nationality
- Experiences of disability-related discrimination

Management Issues

19 cases had a primary theme of Management Issue, with additional management concerns noted in several multi-theme cases. Issues reported included:

- Leadership style, communication, micromanagement
- Perceived lack of leadership capability, direction or engagement
- Concerns about how work was allocated
- Management of wellbeing and Occupational Health referrals
- Handling of formal processes and organisational change
- Managing individual behaviours within teams

- Perceptions of a blame culture

System and Process

16 cases related to Systems and Processes across the Trust. Many were linked to restructure or consultation processes. Of these, several were escalated to senior leaders for further review. Examples included:

- Delayed or absent responses to emails
- Delays in formal processes and communication gaps
- Insufficient wellbeing support during formal processes

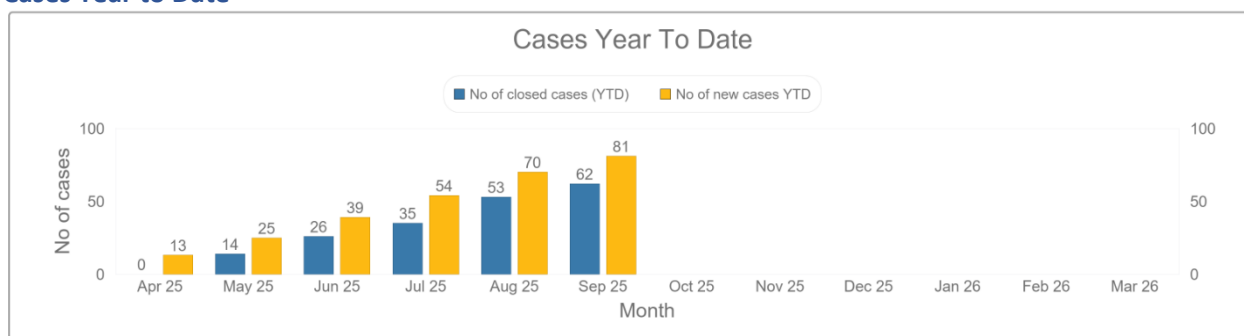
Bullying and Harassment

6 cases had a primary Bullying and Harassment theme. Staff reported:

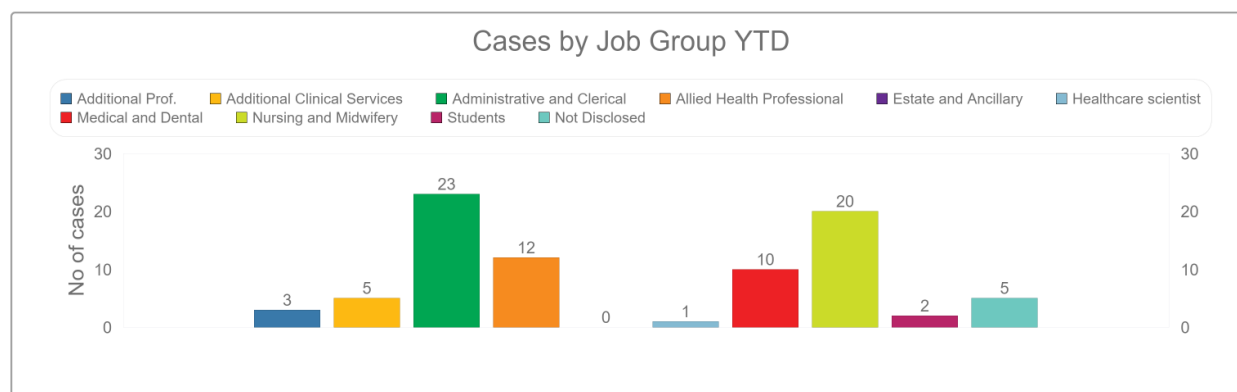
- Intimidating language and behaviour
- Verbal abuse, including shouting and swearing
- Accusatory or dismissive tone
- Micromanagement or belittling behaviour
- Unrealistic expectations or lack of support with reasonable adjustments
- Perceived unfair treatment compared with colleagues

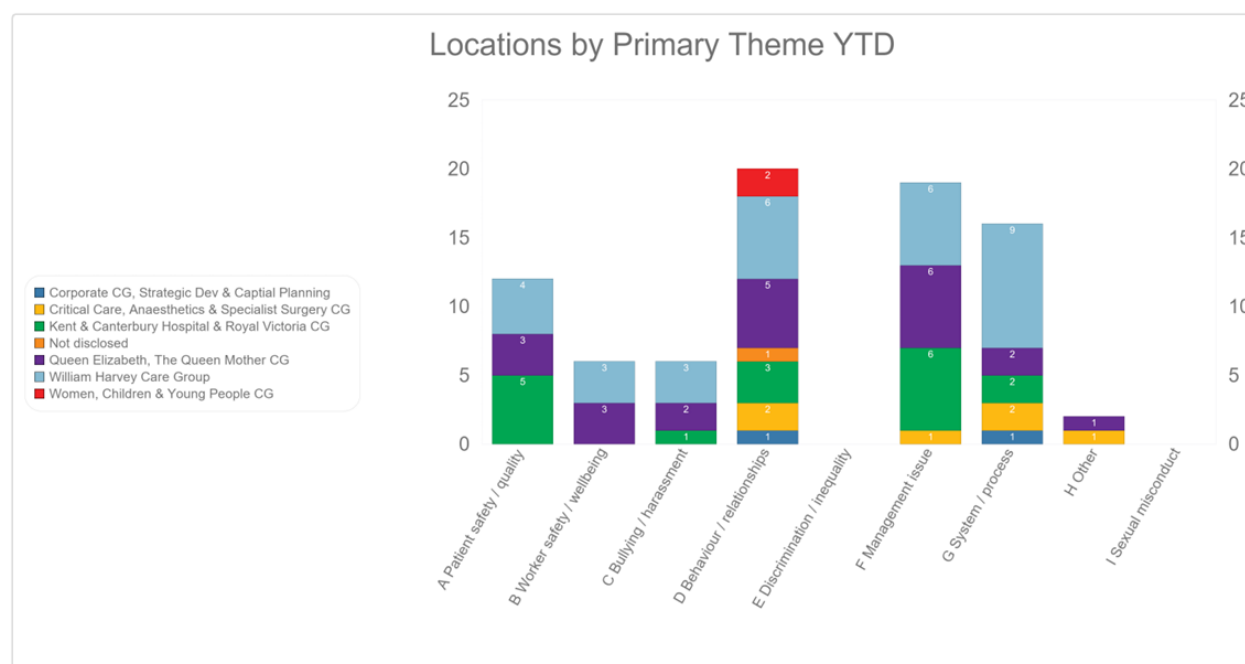
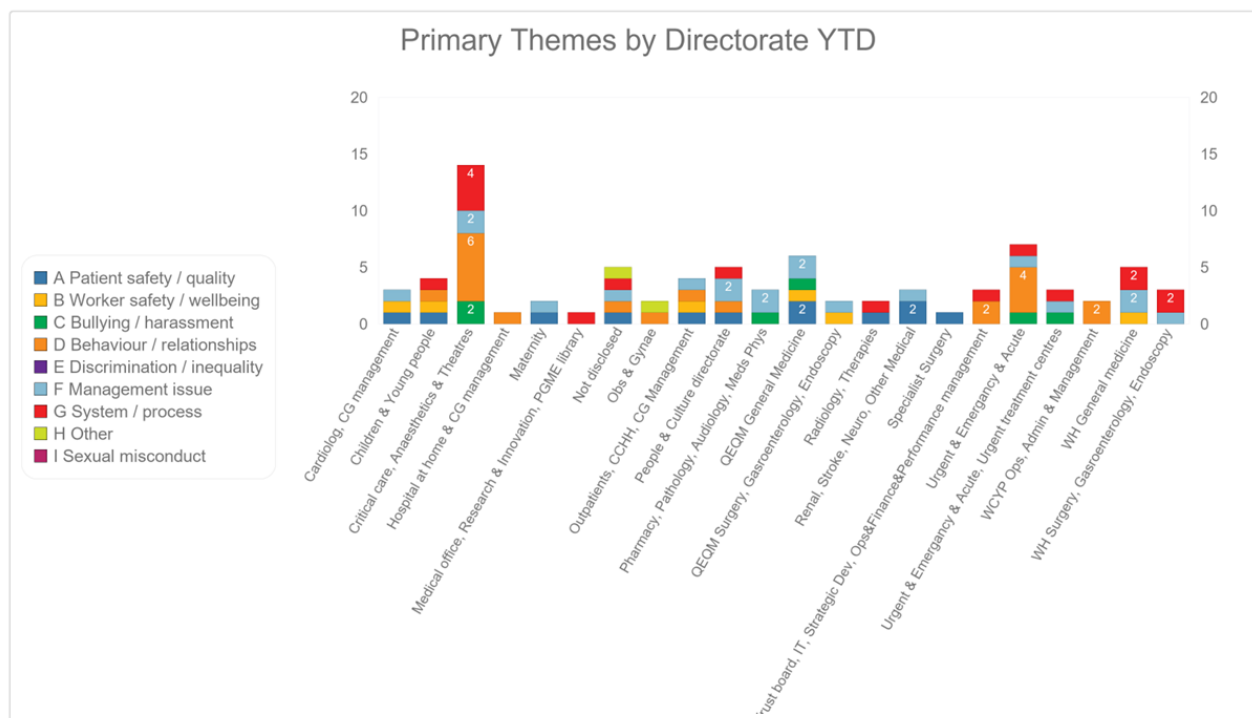
12. Statistical Graphs

Cases Year to Date



Concerns raised by Directorate





13. Why do staff use The Guardian Service?

Staff continue to report that the primary benefit of The Guardian Service is the impartial support it provides. Many staff members comment that the independence of the Guardian gives them confidence that their concerns will be treated confidentially and without judgement. This independent position is frequently cited as a key factor in staff feeling safe to speak up.

A significant proportion of staff who contacted the service during April to September indicated that they had previously raised concerns but felt they had not been listened to. Others approached the Guardian for impartial guidance, emotional support and clarity on their options. For some individuals, simply having a confidential space to talk through their concerns with someone external to the Trust was sufficient to help them determine their next steps.

Staff valued being able to discuss concerns without fear of reprisal, and although fear of detriment was noted, it was not the most common reason for contacting the service during this period. Many staff sought reassurance, advice or a better understanding of how to progress an issue safely, and the opportunity to engage confidentially with the Guardian supported this.

Why use the Guardian service? (Year to date)

Reason	Number	Percentage
A Impartial support	37	45.68%
B Fear of reprisal	11	13.58%
C Believe they will not be listened to	3	3.70%
D Have raised concern before but have not been listened to	29	35.80%
E Other	1	1.23%
	81	100.00%

14. Detriment

There has been no reported detriment during this period.

The Guardian Service encourages staff to speak up while reassuring them that they will not suffer any detriment as a result.

The FTSU Guardian spends considerable time with staff members to create a psychologically safe space in which they feel able to share their experiences openly. Staff are reminded that, should they feel they have experienced detriment, they must report this to the FTSU Guardian immediately. This is a key part of the process and helps to ensure staff feel confident that they will continue to be supported.

Detriment remains a significant concern associated with speaking up and continues to have an important influence on the overall Freedom to Speak Up culture.

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

- The FTSUG listens, coaches, and encourages staff to raise their own concerns. Often, a listening ear is all that is required, and suggestions on using existing tools—such as team meetings and supervision—can help individuals reach a resolution.
- The FTSUG supports staff by highlighting the value of a facilitated meeting, providing an opportunity for both parties to engage in an open and honest conversation.
- In some instances, staff involved in a formal process contact FTSUG. The FTSUG explains that emotional support can be provided, but they cannot participate in the formal process itself.
- The Trust has demonstrated its commitment to fostering a healthy speak-up culture and has supported the introduction of The Guardian Service within East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust.
- While the Trust has responded to concerns raised through The Guardian Service, the timeliness and consistency of responses vary across departments.
- The service has been promoted via the staff intranet, with posters and postcards distributed across different sites.

- The FTSUG attends meetings and events both on site and via MS Teams to brief staff about the service and encourage a culture of speaking up.

The FTSU Guardian's role is complex, and the landscape continues to evolve. To ensure best practice, the FTSU Guardian completes annual refresher training provided by the NGO to support ongoing learning and development.

16. Learning and Improvements

- Monthly meetings are held with the Deputy Director of People and the Chief People Officer to review the monthly activity reports. During these meetings, case outcomes, emerging themes and learning points are discussed, while maintaining the confidentiality of all individuals.
- The FTSU Guardian attends fortnightly "Listen and Learn" meetings with other Guardians within The Guardian Service, where complex concerns are raised, good practice is shared and learning is embedded. Reflecting on practice continues to inform ongoing improvement.
- The FTSU Guardian attends regional meetings, workshops, events and conferences organised by national speak-up bodies and training providers. These, alongside regular professional updates and bulletins, enable Guardians to keep abreast of developments in the field and support the effective handling of concerns and continuous improvement.

17. Comments & Recommendations

East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust has implemented The Guardian Service as its provider of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians. Data for the April to September period indicates that the service has been well received, with staff engagement continuing to increase. Communication with the Trust to date has been constructive, and it is recommended that this collaborative approach is maintained through continued visibility, openness, and support for a speaking-up culture.

A key recommendation is that the Board continues to reinforce the importance of Freedom to Speak Up across all levels of leadership, particularly middle management. Staff frequently report that leadership style, communication, and day-to-day management behaviours influence their willingness to raise concerns. Additional development in behavioural leadership, conflict resolution, and managing difficult conversations would further support consistent practice and help address recurring themes.

Given the rise in concerns relating to systems and processes, particularly during restructuring and consultation periods, it is recommended that communication during organisational change is strengthened. Clearer, more timely communication and better coordination of support during formal processes would reduce uncertainty and improve staff experience.

Several staff members also raised concerns regarding how incidents involving abusive or aggressive patients are managed. A consistent theme is that staff do not always feel confident or supported when dealing with challenging behaviours and that security support can feel variable across sites. Staff would welcome clearer pathways for accessing immediate help, more responsive on-site security support, and training on managing abusive behaviours. Related to this, some staff noted a "bystander effect," where colleagues feel unsure how to intervene safely. Targeted training and clearer expectations may help reduce this.

Visibility of senior leaders remains important to staff. Many reported that they would value a more regular presence on wards and departments, with opportunities to discuss operational pressures and local concerns directly. Increased leadership visibility across all sites would help build trust, strengthen communication, and support early identification of emerging issues.

In addition, several staff expressed uncertainty about the role of HR and Occupational Health, with some perceiving these services as primarily process-driven rather than supportive. The Board may wish to consider whether further communication, engagement sessions, or visibility from HR/OD teams could help clarify their role, set expectations, and improve staff confidence in seeking advice.

It is also recommended that the Trust continues to strengthen the working relationship between the FTSU Guardians and the Employee Relations (ER) team. A cohesive and collaborative approach helps ensure that processes are aligned, staff receive consistent guidance, and concerns can be addressed in a timely and supportive manner.

Overall, these recommendations aim to foster a culture in which speaking up is embedded in everyday practice:

- continued promotion of Freedom to Speak Up
- strengthened middle-management development
- improved communication during organisational change
- enhanced support for staff managing abusive behaviours
- greater senior leadership visibility across sites
- reinforcement of supportive and accessible HR/OD functions
- clear and cohesive working relationships between the FTSU Guardians and ER
- continued encouragement to raise bullying or harassment concerns promptly

By maintaining these approaches, the Trust can continue to build an open, transparent culture in which all staff feel safe, supported, and heard.

18. Staff Feedback

As The Guardian Service only commenced work alongside East Kent Hospitals on 17 March 2025, the period of available data is limited.

Feedback is typically gathered through an anonymous survey provided to staff upon the closure of a concern. This survey helps us evaluate the service, identify areas for improvement, and highlight what worked well.

We expect to have received more survey responses by the time of the next Board report, at which point we will be able to present and reflect on the initial staff feedback.

In addition to survey data, we have received direct personal feedback from staff members upon closure of cases. A small selection of this feedback is provided below:

- I would like to thank you for your support. You have been ABSOLUTELY AMAZING!
- Thank you so much for coming in today. I truly appreciate your time and support. Your presence had a positive impact, and the staff valued having the space to talk openly.
- I've filled in the survey and can't thank you enough for being there for me. Even though I didn't take things further, the service—and you—have been invaluable.

- I was so distressed at the time and knowing someone was there to support me was amazing. “Thank you” really isn’t enough but thank you.
- Thank you very much for your support and for taking the time to be there for the meeting. It helped me regain the confidence to speak up. I think your service is invaluable, and EKHUFT has long needed an independent service to support staff in speaking up.