

Public Board of Directors
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Confidential/ public paper:	Public
Report Title:	Freedom to speak up (FTSU) annual report 2024/2025
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Presented by:	Wendy Fowler, Freedom to speak up guardian
Vision and values:	<p>The Trust vision is to improve the mental, physical and social wellbeing of the people in our communities.</p> <p>Freedom to Speak Up ensures we are inclusive so that all staff feel safe to raise concerns, we keep improving, and we work together and demonstrate our commitment to providing quality care. It supports the Trust's ongoing efforts to improve lives by addressing risks early as well as encouraging staff to make improvements.</p>
Purpose and key actions:	<p>The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with an update in relation to Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) within the Trust for the period from April 2024 to April 2025. This will allow Board to hear directly from the FTSU Guardian regarding key developments, challenges, and focus areas, including:</p> <p>Review of Thematic Analysis: Board to discuss the thematic analysis of FTSU concerns to identify emerging trends, key issues, and areas requiring attention.</p> <p>Influencing Cultural Change: For the first time, results from staff survey questions related to speaking up have been included in manager level summaries. This change increases visibility of the speaking up culture in a way that has not previously been available.</p> <p>Strengthening Local Resolution: Focus on enhancing local resolution processes and improving the responsiveness to concerns raised.</p> <p>Raising Awareness and Promoting a Supportive Culture: Continue efforts to raise the profile of the FTSU Guardian role across the organisation</p>
Executive summary:	<p>Executive Summary</p> <p>This report provides an overview of Freedom to Speak Up activity across Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust (SHSC) for the period April 2024 to March 2025. A total of 114 concerns were raised, down slightly from the previous year, but the complexity and emotional impact of some cases were significant.</p> <p>Concerns primarily related to systems and processes, worker safety and wellbeing, and patient safety. Many cases highlighted issues of unclear responsibilities, stretched services, or concerns not being visibly addressed.</p>

	<p>Concerns disproportionately affected clinical teams, with themes of moral distress, fear of blame, and burn out being an issue in some areas.</p> <p>The Trust continues to invest in wellbeing resources, training and leadership engagement. However, staff, particularly in clinical areas, report difficulties accessing these offers due to workload, shift constraints and access to computers. A focus on improving the day-to-day experience of work is critical.</p> <p>Priorities include supporting managers to strengthen their teams' speaking up culture in conjunction with staff survey results, increasing the visibility of FTSU, expanding the champion network and continue to offer training to managers, through SHSC manager.</p>
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Which strategic objective does the item primarily contribute to:				
Effective Use of Resources	Yes	x	No	Given the breadth of concerns that are raised, FTSU impacts on all of these areas.
Deliver Outstanding Care	Yes	x	No	
Great Place to Work	Yes	x	No	
Reduce inequalities	Yes	x	No	

What is the contribution to the delivery of standards, legal obligations and/or wider system and partnership working.	
<p>Freedom to Speak Up supports SHSC in meeting its obligations under the NHS Standard Contract and CQC Well-Led Framework by helping to maintain an open and safe culture for raising concerns. It promotes compliance with statutory duties related to whistleblowing, speaking up, and staff safety.</p> <p>The FTSU function also contributes to wider workforce and system priorities, supporting cultural development, inclusion, and staff experience.</p>	
BAF and corporate risk/s:	BAF 0024 Risk of failing to meet fundamental standards of care caused by lack of appropriate systems and auditing of compliance with standards, resulting in avoidable harm and negative impact on service user outcomes and experience, staff wellbeing, development of closed cultures, reputation, future sustainability of particular services which could result in potential for regulatory action.
Any background papers/ items previously considered:	Executive Management Team (EMT) 17 April People Committee (PC) 13 May 2025 Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) 14 May 2025
Recommendation:	<p>The Board of Directors are asked:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To note the report for assurance. Support targeted action to improve the day-to-day experience of clinical staff, including simplifying systems, improving communication, and ensuring access to wellbeing support that reflects the realities of frontline work. Champion the use of staff survey data to strengthen local insight and drive improvement in speaking up culture at team and service level. Support a culture of openness and compassion by considering, as a leader, how your actions and behaviours influence the speaking up culture and how you can actively role model the values and behaviours that encourage others to speak up.

**Freedom to Speak up Annual Report
May 2025**

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board of Directors (BoD) with an update in to Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) within the Trust for the period from April 2024 to April 2025. This will allow BoD to hear directly from the FTSU Guardian regarding key developments, challenges, and focus areas, including:

Review of Thematic Analysis: BoD to discuss the thematic analysis of FTSU concerns to identify emerging trends, key issues, and areas requiring attention.

Influencing Cultural Change: For the first time, results from staff survey questions related to speaking up have been included in manager level summaries. This change increases visibility of the speaking up culture in a way that has not previously been available.

Strengthening Local Resolution: Focus on enhancing local resolution processes and improving the responsiveness to concerns raised.

Raising Awareness and Promoting a Supportive Culture: Continue efforts to raise the profile of the FTSU Guardian role across the organisation.

Section 1: Analysis and supporting detail

1.1 Freedom to speak up (FTSU) background

Freedom to Speak Up is a national initiative led by the National Guardian's Office, supporting NHS workers to raise concerns safely and confidently. It is a key feature of a well-led organisation, contributing to patient safety, staff experience and organisational learning. The National Guardian's refreshed national strategy, published in 2024, serves as a guiding framework for organisations. It places considerable emphasis on cultural change to foster an environment where workers feel confident that their concerns will be welcomed, listened to and acted upon.

1.2 Reporting and information sharing by the FTSU Guardian

The FTSU Guardian meets regularly with the Chief Executive, Chair of Governors, Non-Executive Director lead for Freedom to Speak Up, and the executive lead for FTSU, currently the Associate Director of Communications, Corporate Governance & Assurance. These meetings provide an opportunity for the Guardian to raise concerns and share emerging themes from speaking up activity. To support organisational learning and improve responses to concerns, the Guardian also meets with the Executive Director of Nursing, Professions and Quality; the Executive Director of People; and the Deputy Director of People.

FTSU updates are submitted to the People Committee, Quality Assurance Committee, and the Board. In addition, the Guardian attends the Executive Managers' Meeting to share key learning, insights, and themes.

1.3 Actions taken to develop and embed speaking up at SHSC during 2024/25

This section outlines the key activities undertaken by the Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) Guardian to further embed a culture of speaking up across the organisation. These activities aim to promote openness, support staff to raise concerns, and strengthen organisational learning through improved visibility, engagement, and collaboration.

- The FTSU Guardian is working in collaboration with the Trust to enhance understanding of speaking up culture, informed by findings from the annual staff survey.
- The importance of raising concerns, and the role of the FTSU Guardian, is embedded in the corporate welcome programme for all new starters.
- The importance of fostering a positive speaking up culture is reinforced monthly to key managers through the Chief Executive's cascade communication.
- Learning from FTSU concerns has been disseminated via the SHSC Learning Report, safety bulletins, Connect, and through local team communications.

- The FTSU Guardian contributes to the SHSC Manager development programme, supporting managers to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to respond effectively to concerns and foster psychologically safe teams aligned with the Trust's values and priorities.
- Promotional materials have been shared via Connect, the Trust's staff newsletter, to raise awareness of the Freedom to Speak Up function.

1.3 Concerns raised and category

There were 114 FTSU concerns raised in the financial year from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 compared to 130 in the previous year. The small decrease in concerns raised was due to fewer concerns being raised in quarter 4.

Figure 1 shows that most concerns fall under 3 areas but there is some overlap between areas:

- Systems and processes
- Worker safety and wellbeing
- Patient safety/quality

There has been a sharp increase in worker wellbeing from this time last year.

Figure 1: Concern by category

Concern by category	Primary Category 2024/25	Secondary Category 2024/25	Total
*Worker Safety and Wellbeing	19	30	49
Systems and Process	34	12	46
*Patient Safety/Quality	26	15	41
*Other inappropriate attitudes or behaviours	16	5	21
Cultural	13	2	15
Discrimination/unfavourable treatment due to a protected characteristic	9	3	13
Leadership/Management	6	2	8
Bullying and Harassment	1	3	4
Other –	4	2	6
Environmental and Infrastructure	4	0	4
*Discrimination/unfavourable treatment due to Speaking Up	1	0	1
*Anonymous	-	-	1

*Mandatory categories which are reported to the National Guardian

Initial contact was made via an email, telephone call or meeting within two working days unless the FTSU Guardian was on leave, in which case an alternative contact person was provided for any urgent concerns.

Key insights

1.4 Patient safety and staff wellbeing

A significant number of concerns raised through Freedom to Speak Up relate to patient safety and staff wellbeing. These are frequently linked to systemic issues such as unclear roles and responsibilities, ineffective communication, or a lack of visible response to concerns raised.

A significant proportion of concerns raised through Freedom to Speak Up relate to patient safety and staff wellbeing. In many cases, these concerns are underpinned by issues with systems and processes, including unclear roles and responsibilities, poor communication, or a perception that concerns are not being acknowledged or acted upon. Additionally, there is a perception among some staff that, when things go wrong in clinical areas, they may be unfairly held to account despite the presence of wider systemic issues.

1.5 Discrimination/unfavourable treatment due to protected characteristics

There has been a rise in staff raising concerns about discrimination or unfavourable treatment linked to protected characteristics. Four of these concerns related to a shared issue, prompting the Director of Operations and Transformation to offer direct support to the staff involved. While it is difficult to determine whether the increase reflects a growing problem or greater confidence in speaking up, it is widely recognised that issues of discrimination are often under-reported.

Concerns have included experiences of microaggressions, disability-related discrimination, and a perceived increase in hostility from the public, particularly in the context of wider social and geopolitical events. In response to concerns raised, the lone working policy is being reviewed and disability and microaggressions are being included in FTSU training, alongside promoting the lived experience of staff with disability.

This work complements wider Trust initiatives, including strengthened staff networks, the establishment of an ethnically diverse nursing network, a values-led cultural development programme, and ongoing work with local police on hate incident reporting. The Guardian continues to encourage leaders to utilise the 'Too Hot to Handle' report on racism in the NHS to support learning and action.

1.6 Systems and processes

Concerns categorised under systems and processes span both individual issues and wider systemic challenges, some of which are outside the Trust's direct control. Themes include difficulties within clinical pathways, ineffective feedback loops, perceptions of poor organisation, and a sense that decisions are made unfairly, without a clear route to challenge.

In one case, staff reported new responsibilities being assigned to a clinical team without adequate planning, engagement, or visible senior oversight. This highlighted ongoing challenges in shared care arrangements and role clarity, where it can be difficult to identify who made the decision and how concerns can be appropriately raised or addressed.

Some teams have reported feeling unsupported or not listened to, which has led to frustration and, in some instances, increased stress and sickness—particularly where workloads are high and staff feel they may be blamed if issues arise. There is concern that the pressures of working in a stretched system may not be taken into account should something go wrong, and this creates considerable anxiety. These experiences highlight the importance of listening to and understanding the needs of teams, particularly clinical teams, to ensure staff feel supported to deliver safe and sustainable care. Not all staff feel empowered to take action, even when they are aware of problems. The development of the improvement and change framework, which offers tools and guidance to help staff implement change, aims to build confidence and increase the proportion of staff who feel able to make improvements within their control.

1.7 Worker safety and wellbeing

Reports relating to worker wellbeing have increased significantly compared to the previous year. These concerns typically reflect a notable impact on staff safety, emotional wellbeing, or psychological health. Concerns appear to disproportionately affect staff in clinical teams.

There are several Trust-wide initiatives in place to support staff, including access to wellbeing resources and active staff networks. However, clinical staff have reported difficulty accessing these offers due to high service demand, limited flexibility during shifts, and restricted access to computers. Several requests have been made for structured debriefs following incidents; where these have been raised, they have been addressed locally. Some staff have also shared emotional strain linked to unmet service user needs or delays in care, leading to moral distress and a sense of helplessness. In addition, a perception of blame culture persists in some areas, where staff feel they may be held personally accountable when things go wrong, without acknowledgement of wider system pressures. While the Trust has invested in a range of wellbeing initiatives, including sessions delivered by an international coach, it is clear that more needs to be done to better support all staff, particularly those in clinical roles. This includes focusing on improving the day-to-day experience of work, ensuring systems are designed to reflect the realities of busy clinical environments, and avoiding the creation of unnecessary or unintended burdens for those in clinical services.

1.8 Bullying and harassment

There have been four cases where staff reported bullying and harassment, all of which involved HR. The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian provided additional support to the individuals involved and escalated any further information or concerns as appropriate.

1.9 Forward priorities for Freedom to Speak Up

- Continue to raise the profile of Freedom to Speak Up through a broad range of activities, including meetings, walk rounds, attendance at events, and regular communications.
- Support managers to understand and respond to their staff survey results, with a focus on developing a positive speaking up culture within their teams.
- Continue to provide support and training for SHSC managers and expand access to relevant sessions for all staff.
- Review and update the Freedom to Speak Up Standard Operating Procedure to ensure it remains fit for purpose.
- Expand the FTSU Champion Network and deliver targeted training to enhance local visibility and support.
- Maintain close working with Directors to respond to concerns and focus on embedding learning both locally and organisationally.

Section 2: Risks

- 2.1 Work to implement the FTSU Ambition and Strategy and the intelligence gained from concerns raised will help to identify cultural issues and in responding to concerns it will give the opportunity for the organisation to meaningfully engage staff. The FTSU Guardian also promotes a culture of openness and transparency. The work of the FTSU Guardian and, developing a strong speak up culture, should help to mitigate Baf Risk 0024

Benchmarking

The information provided within this report seeks to demonstrate the active presence of FTSU within the organisation, its ongoing development, and efforts to respond to matters raised.

Triangulation

The FTSU Guardian will continue to work with the Executive Director of Nursing, Professions and Quality the Director of People which enables more effective information sharing, responses to concerns and learning.

The FTSU Guardian contributes to the quarterly learning and safety report that is presented to the Quality Committee.

Section 4: Implications

4.1 Strategic Priorities and Board Assurance Framework

1. Effective Use of Resources
2. Deliver Outstanding Care
3. Great Place to Work
4. Reduce inequalities

Strengthening the speaking up culture positively affects all aspects of the trusts strategic priorities as well as strengthening the safety culture. It does this by promoting that all staff “have a voice that counts” and we need all staff to feel safe to have robust conversations about services user care, raise concerns when needed and propose improvements.

Equalities, diversity and inclusion

4.2 FTSU concerns relating to discrimination are shared with the equality, diversity & inclusion team.

There is a diverse range of FTSU Champions which allows for staff to have a greater choice of who they may feel comfortable talking to.

Culture and People

4.3 The work of the FTSU Guardian seeks to promote an open and transparent culture and to remove barriers for staff to feel safe to speak up.



Integration and system thinking

4.4 None directly arising from this report.

Financial

4.5 None directly arising from this report.

Compliance - Legal/Regulatory

4.6 None directly arising from this report, save for the good practice necessity to receive updates from the FTSU Guardian

5.Recommendation:

The Board of Directors are asked

- To note the report for **assurance**.

Support targeted action to improve the day-to-day experience of clinical staff, including simplifying systems, improving communication, and ensuring access to wellbeing support that reflects the realities of frontline work.

Champion the use of staff survey data to strengthen local insight and drive improvement in speaking up culture at team and service level.

Support a culture of openness and compassion by considering, as a leader, how your actions and behaviours influence the speaking up culture and how you can actively role model the values and behaviours that encourage others to speak up.