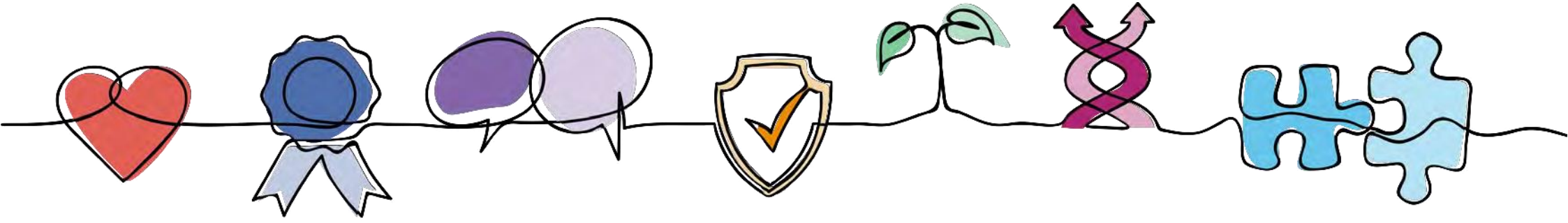
Publication approval reference: PAR1245_i

Freedom to Speak Up policy for the NHS

Version 2, March 2026



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Equality and Health Inequalities Statement

Promoting equality and addressing health inequalities are at the heart of NHS England's values. Throughout the development of the policies and processes cited in this document, we have:

- Given due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity, and to foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic (as cited under the Equality Act 2010) and those who do not share it; and
- Given regard to the need to reduce inequalities between patients in access to, and outcomes from healthcare services and to ensure services are provided in an integrated way where this might reduce health inequalities.

Speak up – we will listen

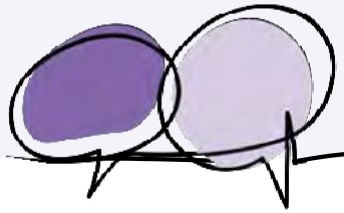
We welcome speaking up and we will listen. By speaking up at work you will be playing a vital role in helping us to keep improving our services for all patients and the working environment for our staff.

This policy is for all our workers. The NHS People Promise commits to ensuring that "we each have a voice that counts, that we all feel safe and confident to speak up, and take the time to really listen to understand the hopes and fears that lie behind the words".

We want to hear about any concerns you have, whichever part of the organisation you work in. We know some groups in our workforce feel they are seldom heard or are reluctant to speak up. You could be an agency worker, bank worker, locum or student. We also know that workers with disabilities, or from a minority ethnic background or the LGBTQ+ community do not always feel able to speak up.
This policy is for all workers and we want to hear all our workers' concerns.

We ask all our workers to complete the online training on speaking up. The online module on listening up is specifically for managers to complete and the module on following up is for senior leaders to complete.

You can find out more about what Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) is in these videos



This policy

All NHS organisations and others providing NHS healthcare services in primary and secondary care in England are required to adopt this national policy as a minimum standard to help normalise speaking up for the benefit of patients and workers. Its aim is to ensure all matters raised are captured and considered appropriately.

What can I speak up about?

You can speak up about anything that gets in the way of patient care or affects your working life. That could be something which doesn't feel right to you: for example, a way of working or a process that isn't being followed; you feel you are being discriminated against; or you feel the behaviours of others is affecting your wellbeing, or that of your colleagues or patients.

Speaking up is about all of these things.

Speaking up, therefore, captures a range of issues, some of which may be appropriate for other existing processes (for example, HR or patient safety/quality) https://stellarhealthcare.org.uk/stellar-policies/. As an organisation, we will listen and work with you to identify the most appropriate way of responding to the issue you raise.

We want you to feel safe to speak up

Your speaking up to us is a gift because it helps us identify opportunities for improvement that we might not otherwise know about.

We will not tolerate anyone being prevented or deterred from speaking up or being mistreated because they have spoken up.

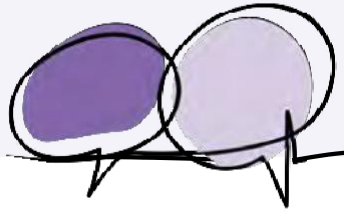
Who can speak up?

Anyone who works in NHS healthcare, including pharmacy, optometry and dentistry. This encompasses any healthcare professionals, non-clinical workers, receptionists, directors, managers, contractors, volunteers, students, trainees, junior doctors, locum, bank and agency workers, and former workers.

Who can I speak up to?

Speaking up internally

Most speaking up happens through conversations with supervisors and line managers where challenges are raised and resolved quickly. We strive for a culture where that is normal, everyday practice and encourage you to explore this option – it may well be the easiest and simplest way of resolving matters.



However, you have other options in terms of who you can speak up to, depending on what feels most appropriate to you and depending on the size of the organisation you work in (some of the options set out below will only be available in larger organisations).

- Senior manager, partner or director with responsibility for the subject matter you are speaking up about.
- The patient safety team (Vishal Kapil - vishal.kapil@nhs.net) or clinical governance team where concerns relate to patient safety or wider quality (annabeeston@nhs.net)
- For fraud issues, either the Freedom to Speak up Officer (Hannah Knight – hannah.knight24@nhs.net) or (Debbie Ryan - debbie.ryan6@nhs.net)
- Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Hannah Knight – hannah.knight24@nhs.net who can support you to speak up if you feel unable to do so by other routes. Hannah is the Digital & Operations Manager at Stort Valley Healthcare, as an employee outside of Stellar Healthcare it ensures there is no conflict-of-interest present within the organisation. The guardian will ensure that people who speak up are thanked for doing so, that the issues they raise are responded to, and that the person speaking up receives feedback on the actions taken. You can find out more about the guardian role here.
- Our senior lead responsible for Freedom to Speak Up (Debbie Ryan - debbie.ryan6@nhs.net) - they provide senior support for our speaking-up guardian and are responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of our FTSU arrangements.
- Our non-executive director responsible for Freedom to Speak Up (Vishal Kapil - vishal.kapil@nhs.net)

Speaking up externally

If you do not want to speak up to someone within your organisation, you can speak up externally to:

- Care Quality Commission (CQC) for quality and safety concerns about the services it regulates – you can find out more about how the CQC handles concerns here.
- NHS England for concerns about:
  - GP surgeries
  - dental practices
  - optometrists
  - pharmacies
  - how NHS trusts and foundation trusts are being run (this includes ambulance trusts and community and mental health trusts)
  - NHS procurement and patient choice
  - the national tariff.

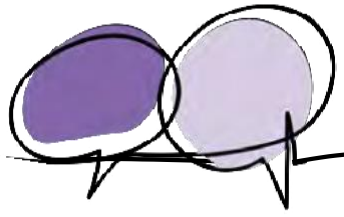
NHS England may decide to investigate your concern themselves, ask your employer or another appropriate organisation to investigate (usually with their oversight) and/or use the information you provide to inform their oversight of the relevant organisation. The precise action they take will depend on the nature of your concern and how it relates to their various roles.

Please note that neither the Care Quality Commission nor NHS England can get involved in individual employment matters, such as a concern from an individual about feeling bullied.

- NHS Counter Fraud Authority for concerns about fraud and corruption, using their online reporting form or calling their freephone line **0800 028 4060**.

If you would like to speak up about the conduct of a member of staff, you can do this by contacting the relevant professional body such as the General Medical Council, Nursing and Midwifery Council, Health & Care Professions Council, General Dental Council, General Optical Council or General Pharmaceutical Council.

Appendix B contains information about making a 'protected disclosure'.



How should I speak up?

You can speak up to any of the people or organisations listed above in person, by phone or in writing (including email).

Confidentiality

The most important aspect of your speaking up is the information you can provide, not your identity.

You have a choice about how you speak up:

- **Openly:** you are happy that the person you speak up to knows your identity and that they can share this with anyone else involved in responding.
- **Confidentially:** you are happy to reveal your identity to the person you choose to speak up to on the condition that they will not share this without your consent.
- **Anonymously:** you do not want to reveal your identity to anyone. This can make it difficult for others to ask you for further information about the matter and may make it more complicated to act to resolve the issue. It also means that you might not be able to access any extra support you need and receive any feedback on the outcome.

In all circumstances, please be ready to explain as fully as you can the information and circumstances that prompted you to speak up.

Advice and support

Your local staff networks can be a valuable source of support.

You can access a range of health and wellbeing support via NHS England:

- Support available for our NHS people.
- Looking after you: confidential coaching and support for the primary care workforce.

NHS England has a Speak Up Support Scheme that you can apply to for support.

You can also contact the following organisations:

- Speak Up Direct provides free, independent, confidential advice on the speaking up process.
- The charity Protect provides confidential and legal advice on speaking up.
- The Trades Union Congress provides information on how to join a trade union.
- The Law Society may be able to point you to other sources of advice and support.
- The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service gives advice and assistance, including on early conciliation regarding employment disputes.

What will we do?

The matter you are speaking up about may be best considered under a specific existing policy/process; for example, our process for dealing with bullying and harassment. If so, we will discuss that with you. If you speak up about something that does not fall into an HR or patient safety incident process, this policy ensures that the matter is still addressed.

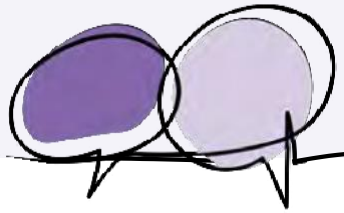
What you can expect to happen after speaking up is shown in Appendix B.

Resolution and investigation

We support our managers/supervisors to listen to the issue you raise and take action to resolve it wherever possible. In most cases, it's important that this opportunity is fully explored, which may be with facilitated conversations and/or mediation.

Where an investigation is needed, this will be objective and conducted by someone who is suitably independent (this might be someone outside your organisation or from a different part of the organisation) and trained in investigations. It will reach a conclusion within a reasonable timescale (which we will notify you of), and a report will be produced that identifies any issues to prevent problems recurring.

Any employment issues that have implications for you/your capability or conduct identified during the investigation will be considered separately.



Communicating with you

We will treat you with respect at all times and will thank you for speaking up. We will discuss the issues with you to ensure we understand exactly what you are worried about. If we decide to investigate, we will tell you how long we expect the investigation to take and agree with you how to keep you up to date with its progress. Wherever possible, we will share the full investigation report with you (while respecting the confidentiality of others and recognising that some matters may be strictly confidential; as such it may be that we cannot even share the outcome with you).

How we learn from your speaking up

We want speaking up to improve the services we provide for patients and the environment our staff work in. Where it identifies improvements that can be made, we will ensure necessary changes are made, and are working effectively. Lessons will be shared with teams across the organisation, or more widely, as appropriate.

Review

We will seek feedback from workers about their experience of speaking up. We will review the effectiveness of this policy and our local process annually, with the outcome published and changes made as appropriate.

Senior leaders' oversight

Our most senior leaders will receive a report at least annually providing a thematic overview of speaking up by our staff to our FTSU guardian(s).

Appendix A:
What will happen when I speak up?

We will:

Thank you for speaking up

- Help you identify the options for resolution
- Signpost you to health and wellbeing support
- Confirm what information you have provided consent to share
- Support you with any further next steps and keep in touch with you

Steps towards resolution:

Engagement with relevant senior managers (where appropriate)

- Referral to HR process
- Referral to patient safety process
- Other type of appropriate investigation, mediation, etc

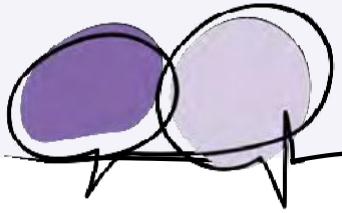
Outcomes:

The outcomes will be shared with you wherever possible, along with learning and improvement identified

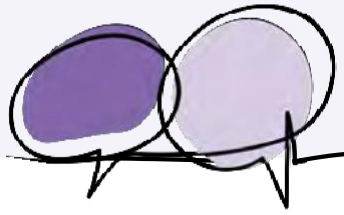
Escalation:

If resolution has not been achieved, or you are not satisfied with the outcome, you can escalate the matter to the senior lead for FTSU or the non-executive lead for FTSU (if you are in an NHS trust)

- Alternatively, if you think there are good reasons not to use internal routes, speak up to an external body, such as the CQC or NHS England



Appendix B:
Making a protected disclosure

Making a 'protected disclosure'

A protected disclosure is defined in the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. This legislation allows certain categories of worker to lodge a claim for compensation with an employment tribunal if they suffer as a result of speaking up. The legislation is complex and to qualify for protection under it, very specific criteria must be met in relation to who is speaking up, about what and to whom. To help you consider whether you might meet these criteria, please seek independent advice from the Protect or a legal representative.