



A voice for change

The Guardian Service: 10-years on

Foreword

Eight years on from the landmark report into care failings at Mid-Staffs NHS Hospital Trust that first introduced the concept, speaking up is now a well-recognised and accepted term. The concept was simple - let staff at the sharp end of service delivery speak freely and without fear and serious issues like avoidable patient harm will be identified and stopped far sooner.

I believe the NHS should be proud of embracing the speaking up concept across one of the most complex, challenged and largest organisations in the world. 'Speaking up' and 'Guardian' have become part of everyday terminology. The theory that what staff have to say presents opportunities to learn and improve is now practiced in health, and other sectors should be brave enough to follow the trail they have blazed.

Recent examples highlight the damage caused to individuals, organisations and trust because leaders fail to grasp the nettle - the failing cultures in the CBI, Parliament and the Met Police are just some of the high-profile cases to have hit headlines this year.

And in health, there is still much more to do. The criminal actions of Lucy Letby, and the missed opportunities to prevent the tragic loss of life she caused, demonstrate that publicly embracing the concept of speaking up can fall way short of creating a culture where leaders always listen and act.

Speaking up as currently defined, and the Guardian role as commonly implemented, must now change.

In this report, drawing on our 10-years' of experience, we make it clear that the current approach must rapidly evolve to achieve the full potential for positive change and improved outcomes that can come from listening to what workers have to say, and acting on it. Guardians who have worked so hard to carve out this new and unique role also need to be properly recognised and supported. Most importantly, the needs of the health and care workforce, with all its diversity, should be addressed.

To achieve this, we are reshaping the remit of our work to focus on driving wider organisational dialogue, and we are calling on the Speak Up community to do the same. Only through supporting dialogue, taking real action, and providing honest feedback will we be able to harness the full potential of what the journey so far has achieved. This evolution will help everyone – leaders, patients, clients and customers – fully benefit from the people who know their business best – their staff.

Dr Simon Mac Rory,

CEO
The Guardian Service Ltd (GSL)

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Only through supporting dialogue, taking real action, and providing honest feedback will we be able to harness the full potential of what the journey so far has achieved.
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Speaking up in health

What we have learnt

Speaking up is now part of NHS terminology. This is seen in the way that the national policy on speaking up has evolved, and the changes to the NHS staff survey which now asks staff directly if they ‘feel safe to speak up about anything that concerns me in this organisation’.

The fact that this has happened in one of the largest, most complex, challenged and scrutinised organisations in the world cannot be underestimated.

Some of the initial wariness and resistance has been overcome. There have been tentative steps from defensiveness to curiosity. Where this has happened leaders have not found their organisations have become swamped with ill-defined issues or personal gripes. Speaking Up has definitely surfaced issues that needed to be seen for the benefit of patients and staff. This is, however, still far from universal.

The way forward is for information from all routes, including Guardians, to be brought together so leaders are clear on what is being spoken up about, which parts of the workforce are (or are not) speaking up, and to identify areas for learning and improvement. This needs to be done in an environment that welcomes this information – even if it might seem challenging.

The response so far has been piecemeal so there are still failings, in some cases tragic ones, where speaking up and responding properly, could have made a difference.

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Why are Guardians and Speaking Up important to your Trust?

Our Guardian gives people a safe and confidential space to raise concerns when they need to. The Guardian is independent of the Trust and people can raise their concerns confidentially.

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Sandra Goatley,
Chief People Officer,
Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust



“

The difference I’ve encountered when I’ve supported staff to speak up in their workplace is one of empowerment and relief.

Natalie Morgan,
GSL Guardian

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We believe there are three areas that need action if further progress is to be made.



Mindset

Problems really are opportunities and leaders are much better knowing about potential issues, even if they are challenging to hear or to put right. This is an easy concept to grasp but difficult to put into practice particularly where there are workforce and other pressures. Leaders need to be alive constantly to the fact that a problem brought to their attention has the potential to prevent a risk materialising, create an improvement, or even save a life.



Language

Speaking up is an action. Workers find this hard enough to do in the best of circumstances, so organisations must not create additional barriers by trying to define what people can or cannot speak up about. People, wherever they are in an organisation, must be encouraged to take that action first with less organisational focus on caveats and ‘maybes’ and more on responding appropriately to what is said.



Leadership

The right mindset and language need to be seen in action wherever leadership is on display. This calls for an active approach. Leaders need to go out of their way to listen to what people are saying, and to speak up themselves. The fact that speaking up is seen to be welcome and that people get thanked for it, cannot be demonstrated too often.

What we have learnt about speaking up in other sectors



Three separate and significant reviews have been published this year looking at culture in the Met Police, national fire and rescue services, and NHS ambulance trusts.

We have commented on all three and as the country's leading experts, we see many of the same issues that started the NHS on its speaking up journey eight years ago.

We strongly believe that our achievements in health can be translated into other sectors.

The clear picture that applies to any sector, is:

- Pressure drives inappropriate behaviour which makes it harder to speak up and for organisations to respond positively. This negative loop must, and can, be broken.
- Where workers regularly deal with life-and-death situations, putting others first can result in those who serve putting themselves, and their colleagues, second. Coping mechanisms develop, and these include behaviours that exclude or marginalise certain groups.
- Hierarchy, seniority, and perceptions of real and perceived power get in the way of the speaking up / listening up dynamic. There are many overt and subtle ways in which these differences impact on speaking up.
- Environments in which 'cliques', 'clans' and 'sub-cultures' thrive impact negatively on people being able to speak up and normalises certain behaviours. This 'toxic loyalty' to the group gets in the way of speaking up and perpetuates poor behaviour, freezing out those who may have something essential, but difficult, to say.
- Countering perceptions of negative consequences for those who speak up, and that speaking up doesn't result in change, is difficult. It requires constant attention, clear action to support those who speak up, and regular demonstration of how speaking up makes a difference.

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Why are Guardians important to your Trust?

For us, Guardians are not just a role or function - they are at the very core of our desired culture of openness and transparency. They are central to our commitment to psychological safety and a healthy work environment for our staff. What Guardians are about is giving our staff a voice to help us become

a better organisation. ”

Ade Adetukasi,
Associate Director of Employee Experience & Organisational Development,
Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust

The recent reviews of the Met Police and fire and rescue services highlight particular challenges:

- Women and black and minority ethnic people are much less represented than in the health sector. This means that women become a minority group in themselves and the barriers that black and minority ethnic people can face are even more acute.
- Regulation, codes of conduct, and an enforcement approach to standards appears to be focused on as a means of 'obligating' speaking up in a way that was not seen as a solution in health. This could lead to a focus on compliance rather than mindset and this may become yet a further barrier to speaking up.

These challenges are familiar to us and other sectors can learn from how we and the health sector have responded. Our experience in health can be used to fast-track improvement for other sectors.

Fulfilling the potential of the Guardian role

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Being a Guardian is a tremendously rewarding and fulfilling experience that allows me to impact on the lives of workers as well as the culture of an organisation in a positive way.

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Lulu Nwosu,
GSL Guardian



To be successful, a Guardian needs to operate across two sets of contrasting dynamics:

1

Responding reactively to people who wish to speak up, whilst also operating proactively to help create a culture where speaking up happens as part of everyday business

2

Operating independently and impartially, whilst forging strong partnerships across an organisation so concerns are heard and necessary action is taken.

However, independent research on the implementation of the Guardian role describes practice that does not match theory, and this is reinforced by feedback from Guardians themselves. Roles are often allocated with a view to ‘ticking the box’, with little understanding of the complexities and workload involved, and minimal time and resources provided. Individuals appointed as Guardians can appear immediately compromised by their position and relationships in an organisation, especially if connected to a ‘head office’ corporate role.

We believe that this situation will continue until a simple fact is accepted - to be successful, Guardians must be independent of the organisations they support.

Eight years on from the Freedom to Speak Up Review, much of the healthcare sector still remains without Guardian support and most of the learning to date has taken place in NHS hospital trusts.

All healthcare workers, and indeed all workers, deserve the support of a Guardian and to work in an environment where speaking up is welcomed.

However, the model developed in hospital trusts cannot be simply transcribed to the rest of the health and social care system - many organisations just aren’t large enough to fund and sustain a Guardian on their own, and smaller workforces will also worsen worries around confidentiality. On the positive side, there are possibilities offered through the integrated care systems, primary care networks, and other ways in which health and care organisations are coming together to offer more integration.

The future of the Guardian in health must be one where:

- Outside of Trusts and similar large organisations, a Guardian supports multiple smaller bodies, removing issues of conflict and enabling confidentiality to be preserved.
- A network of Guardians emerges where everyone irrespective of their employing organisation gets consistent, high-quality support.
- Matters raised are resolved locally wherever possible
- There are routes for escalation to other parts of the system where appropriate, and a means of bringing together the rich web of intelligence this model will produce to create learning and improvement at organisational, partnership and system level.

Outside of health we see a critical need for organisations to tread a similar path as the health sector has been walking, though learning from the pitfalls it has encountered. We have the knowledge and expertise to accelerate other sectors along the path. The starting points must be ‘dialogue’ (discussed in the next section) and a properly understood and supported Guardian role that can operate independently.

Professionalising the Guardian role

We believe being a Guardian is a full-time and specialised role. Over the last ten years, the complexity of the role has shown the importance of having fully trained and supported Guardians, able to give their full attention to individuals who contact them and to work with, though independent of, the organisations they support.

“ Do you feel the independence of your Guardians makes a difference to your staff?
 It does. Where staff may not feel confident speaking up to an in-house Guardian, the independence of our Guardian means they trust the service more. Their independence means they bring a fresh pair of eyes from outside the Trust, and can also provide more internal challenge. As part of the Guardian Service, our Guardian also has access to a network of support and training and is up to date on all the latest best practice and policies. The Guardian Service also provides a 24/7/365 days a week service which is important for our staff so they can raise concerns at any time of day or night. ”

Sandra Goatley,
 Chief People Officer,
 Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust



To ensure that Guardians can do justice to this critical role we ensure that Guardian Service Guardians have:

- Proven management and organisational skills
- Demonstrable experience of working with senior leaders
- Experience of dealing sensitively with difficult issues – acting with integrity and maintaining confidentiality as appropriate
- Knowledge of HR policies and employment law
- Up-to-date DBS checks and

Our Guardians:

- Take part in bi-weekly group learning sessions with peers
- Take lead responsibility for an issue related to speaking up and culture such as: mental health awareness; bullying and harassment; diversity matters; menopause; wellbeing; adoption; safeguarding; and health and safety.
- Are supported with bi-annual psychological counselling sessions and continuous access to a psychotherapist as required
- Undergo an intense induction programme mentored by an experienced Guardian
- Undertake a structured training programme, supported and monitored by an experienced colleague, with progress regularly reviewed
- Complete a range of external training, including the requirements of national bodies

For our clients, this means we can provide a 24/7/365 service where workers have access to an experienced and supported Guardian. It also means that workers know that if they speak to any of our Guardians they will be provided with the same high quality service.

Driving dialogue

A new model for speaking up

For nearly a decade, the focus has been on speaking up. However, national indicators of NHS staff confidence in speaking up have fallen recently leading to the conclusion that the focus on speaking up now needs to shift to the next step, 'listening up'. The premise is that if only people will listen, then people will speak up.



We think differently

After a decade working in this area, we know that treating speaking up and listening up as different actions is flawed. Speaking and listening are shared interactions. The people who do one are the people who do the other. The barriers that get in the way of people speaking up also apply to listening up. The cultures and behaviours that support one, support the other. Trying to characterise each action as different steps in a process is, in itself, a barrier that gets in the way of both sides of the interaction and is inherently polarising – pitching one part of the workforce that 'speaks' against another than 'listens'.

Building on our experience

The Guardian Service is introducing a new model of 'driving dialogue'. Our model sets out a number of principles that apply to both speaking and listening and introduces a simple framework so dialogue results in change by generating follow up actions that are real and feedback that is visible, honest and meaningful. [\(Click to see model\)](#)

We are calling for the health sector to accept that a step-change is needed and to reset the narrative on speaking up. This is a jumping off point for other sectors, so that they promote dialogue from day one to drive learning and improvement.

The next 10 years

- Our voice for change

We want to create a world where people have the confidence to say what needs to be said and the courage to hear what needs to be heard.

This means driving dialogue at every level. This must be supported by an independent Guardian who builds trust and operates unfettered by the obstacles of hierarchy and seniority, and uncompromised by restrictive cultures and negative behaviours.

This approach will drive learning, improvement and change in any sector, create the best working environment for staff, and make organisations and systems safer, more effective, and successful.

“ Speaking up and being heard, with an outcome or an action for their concern, is often enough to keep someone in the workplace ”

Jacque Pamphilon,
GSL Guardian

“

Do you feel the independence of your Guardians makes a difference to your staff?

Having external Guardians has helped us rebuild our speak-up culture. Their Independence gives staff confidence to speak up and trust that action will be taken.

Challenging our leaders on speaking up and listening up is easier for an external Guardian than an internal one.

”

Ade Adetukasi,

Associate Director of Employee Experience & Organisational Development,
Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust



The future of the Guardian role must be one with:

Independence, impartiality, and trust

Guardians operate independently of the organisations they support to provide clear assurance on impartiality, generate trust, and work round issues brought about by professional and other hierarchies and structures.

Assurance and challenge

Guardians operate to agreed escalation protocols and have the backing to ensure that all matters that need to be escalated are escalated. There are protocols in place that ensure that leaders are accountable for these and that they operate in practice, not just theory.

Supported Guardians

The Guardian role is properly recognised and seen as the specialised, skilled, and challenging role that it is. Those in it are provided with the time, resources, training, support, and supervision they need.

Workforce needs met

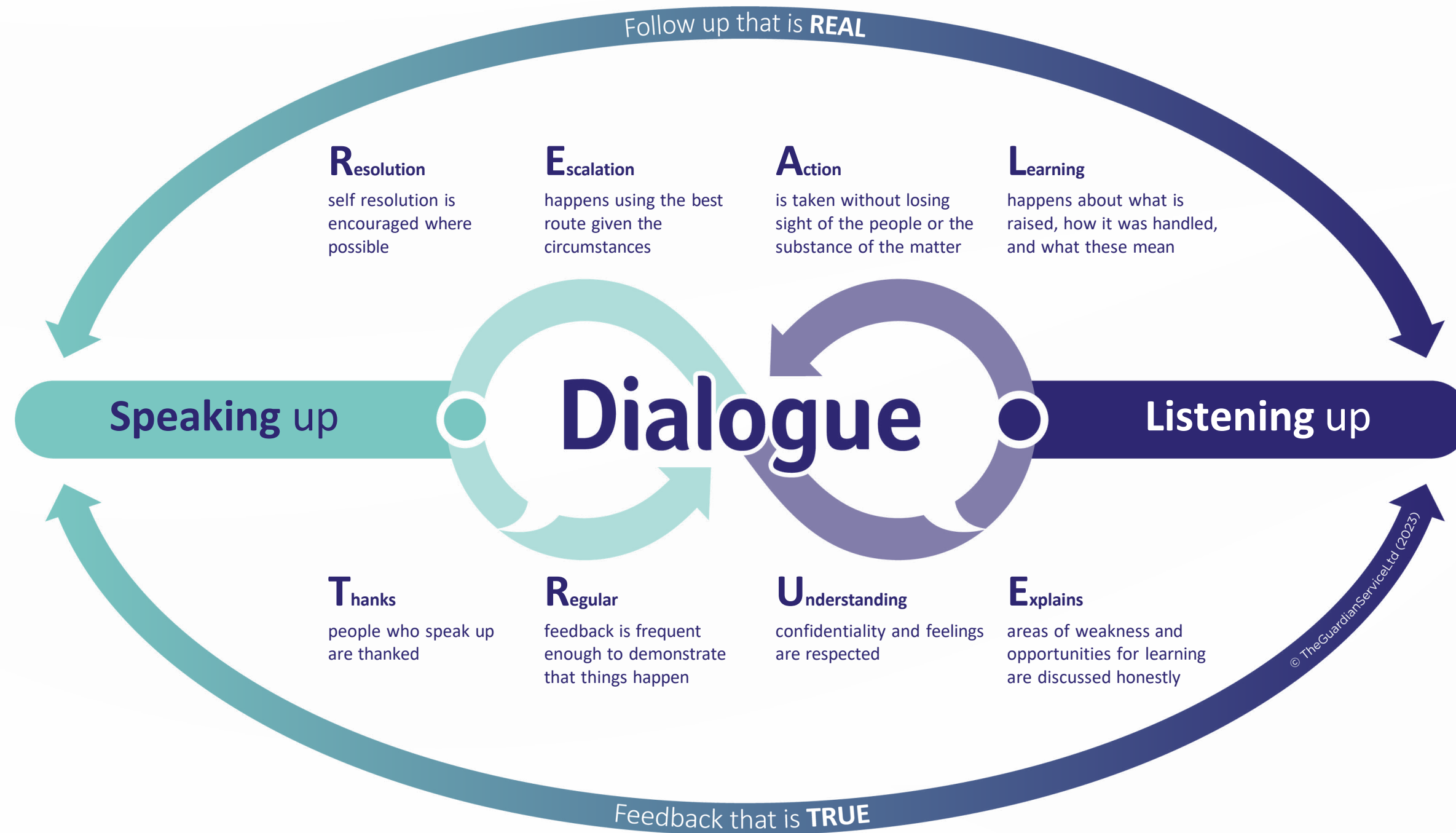
All workers are supported by Guardians who are dedicated to the role, know the specialism, and provide support 24/7/365. Workers have a diverse range of Guardians that they can speak up to. No matter who you are, or what time of day or night it is, there is a place for you to turn where you get the support you need from a Guardian who knows what they are doing.



A timeline



Dialogue process



Ashley Brooks founded The Guardian Service in 2013



“ Our experience shows that these brave organisations benefit in lots of ways from the honesty and credibility that engaging our Guardians brings. ”



Ten years on from the Mid-Staffs report, we asked Ashley for his views on progress with speaking up since 2013 and what the future holds.

Q It's ten years since you started the Guardian Service and eight years since the Francis report was published - how does that feel?

A Starting before the Francis report raised the profile of speaking up, we have grown from very humble beginnings to meet the original objectives - to support and better the lives of NHS staff by giving them a secure and confidential way to raise concerns and be in control of the action they want to take. I am so impressed by the bravery NHS staff have consistently shown over the past ten years to speak up.

As well as being the frontrunner of the speak-up movement, and setting the pace and tone, we have taken the time to build GSL properly and I believe this is recognised by our staff and in the professional service we provide to everyone.

It's interesting that we were using the term 'Guardian' before Francis - it is obviously a term that has struck a chord.

Q What's been the biggest surprise for you in speaking up over the last decade?

A Through the GSL, we have actually created a new profession of Guardian, which is something I didn't expect. I had no idea that this new approach to treating people with care and understanding could be so powerful and create an attractive career for such a diverse and experienced range of people.

Q And so the obvious question is - what has been your biggest disappointment?

A It must be that there are still so many organisations who don't see speaking up as a priority and this hurts whenever I see that another company or sector have let their customers and staff down, and crashed their reputations, because they refuse to embrace speaking up.

Q What difference do you think working with GSL has made to your clients and their staff?

A The clients we work with are brave, because they are willing to let us in and they know if we come in, we will work hard to call things out and put them right. Our experience shows that these brave organisations benefit in lots of ways from the honesty and credibility that engaging our Guardians brings.

Q Why should an organisation use GSL?

A I usually answer this by saying that the police can't police themselves. However well-intentioned, using internal Guardians creates an inherent conflict of interest, and with that mistrust, based on the perception that independence and confidentiality will always be compromised.

Q The Guardian Service has grown a lot and your Guardians have learned a lot over the last decade - so what's next?

A For me, speaking up is still in its infancy. With so many years of experience under our belt, we are now the experts in this field. Even so, we have hardly scratched the surface and there is so much more to do.

I really want to deeply embed the GSL in organisations, like the NHS, where people are the real asset. Alongside this, I want to keep the company ethos and equity that I know really matters to our staff.

Q What does speaking up mean for you?

A If I can't speak up, or no one is prepared to listen, that would make me feel alienated and alone. Speaking Up makes a person feel valued and part of a team.

Guardian Service voices



The Guardian Service employs an experienced and diverse range of people. Here are some of their views on what it means to be a Guardian.

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For me, the key thing is NHS staff having someone totally independent to discuss things with. The fact there is a safe, calm space for staff to explore their options just makes so much sense to me, and can only improve the service for patients and the

wellbeing of staff.”

Malcolm Stammers
GSL Guardian

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Being a GSL Guardian means that I bring an added layer of independence and impartiality that is crucial to supporting an organisation’s speaking-up culture and enabling speaking-up processes and strategies to work well.

Lulu Nwosu
GSL Guardian

“
I get to work with a wonderfully unique team who come from diverse backgrounds but who share the same drive and passion to support staff to get their voices heard.”

Katy Sara
GSL Guardian

“
Being part of the GSL is a unique experience. We are all so different and yet we are all the same in our work ethos and ethics. We all support each other, and we are continuously learning. It is amazing to be part of such a diverse team and yet feel that everyone fits. I also feel that we can support the organisations we work for by having an outside aspect and sharing recommendations that could support culture change and improvement.

Individuals often feel so much better after the first conversation: just a huge sense of relief that they have been able to share their concern in confidence to an independent party.”

Jacque Pamphilon
GSL Guardian

“
I decided long ago that I would only work for organisations which valued and supported people and which had an ethical approach to how it does business. That describes GSL.”

Derek McIlroy
GSL Guardian

“
I learn a lot from my colleagues, how they deal with complex concerns and their outlook on certain subjects. It’s a great mix of backgrounds all us Guardians have, so it’s great when we share all our own learning with each other. It’s a knowledgeable working environment where everyone is happy to help each other and share ideas. There are a lot of opportunities to learn new skills and progress in the areas I feel most passionate about.”

Danielle Marshall
GSL Guardian

Contact us



You can learn more about us on our website:
<https://www.theguardianservice.co.uk/>



You can find our research and papers here:
<https://www.theguardianservice.co.uk/research-and-papers/>



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**The Guardian
Service**
Here to listen

