

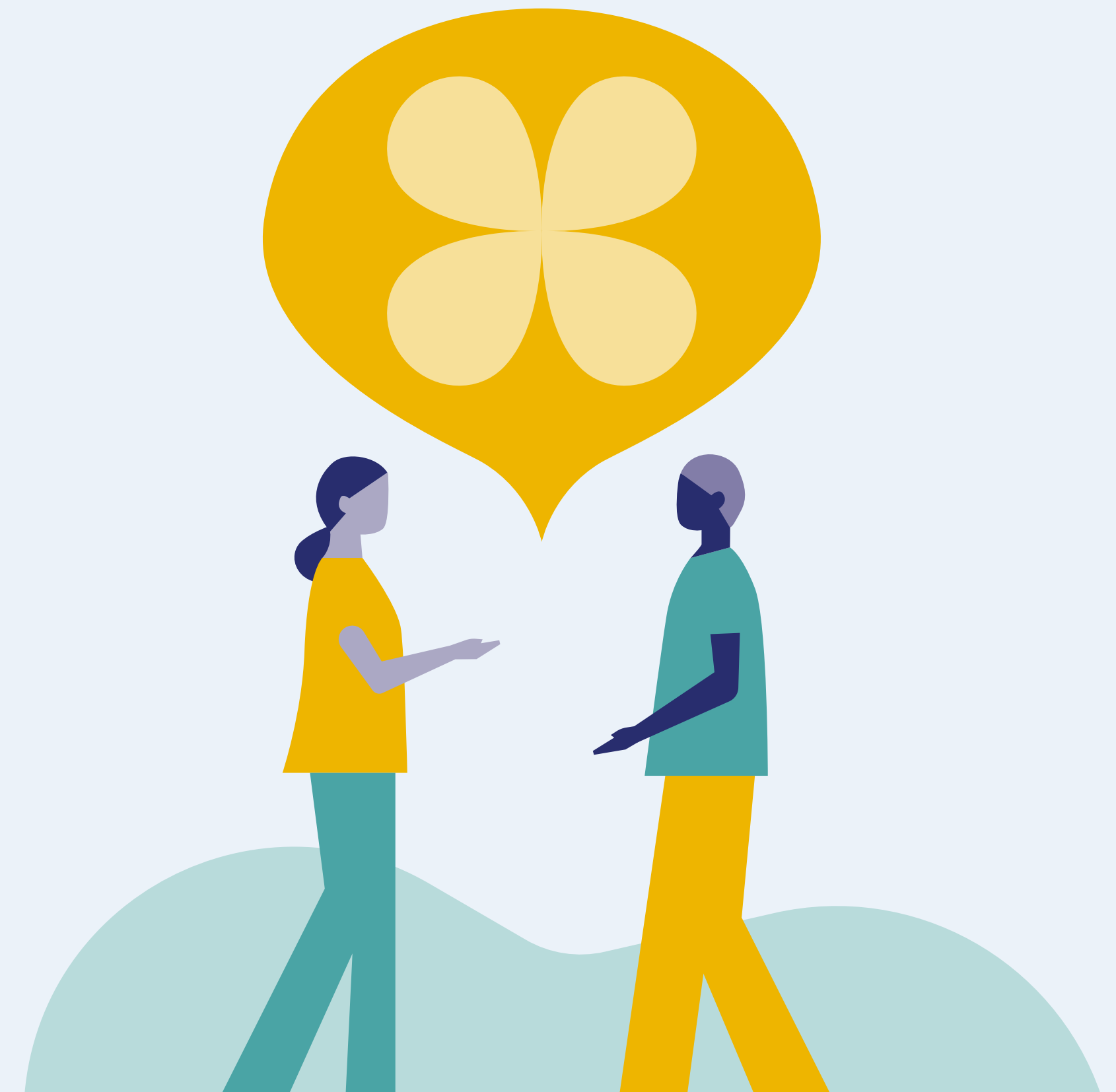


**The Guardian
Service**

Here to listen

A year of insight and growth

Annual Report 2023-2024



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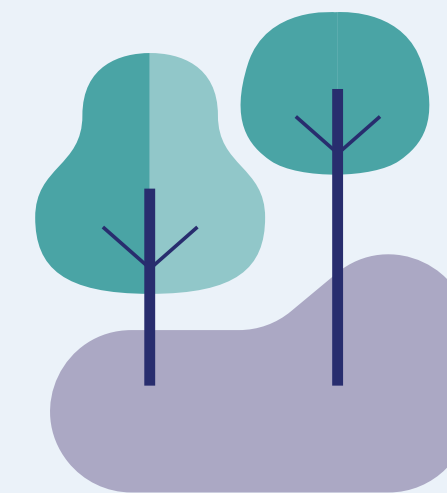
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Foreword

This has been a year of growth. The number and diversity of organisations we support has increased across the UK. This means we have the privilege of being the people to which over 200,000 workers can turn to when they need to speak up – when they feel they have nowhere else to go.

The number of cases we received has also increased at a much greater rate than expected. We handled 2,665 cases during 2023/2024. That represents 2,665 opportunities for someone's voice to be heard, action to be taken, and learning to occur.

In response to this expansion, The Guardian Service Limited (GSL) has also grown, providing an opportunity for us to develop as an organisation. This is about more than recruitment and expanding the variety of services we offer. We are redefining ourselves as specialists in open culture, based on our experiences and use of data and analysis to understand and break down the barriers to real workforce dialogue.

To support this shift, we are building a collective voice for GSL and the organisations we support. The formation of the GSL Alliance of clients will be pivotal to this. Regular engagement with our clients on a collective basis will add fuel to improving our services and client cultures, but also influence change at national level.

I feel we are entering a new chapter in speaking up, one that goes beyond workforce recognition of this important phase. Our Guardians have and continue to provide an important safety valve for individuals and their employers. But we need to create workplaces where everyone has the confidence to speak up to their managers, and not rely on our independent Guardians. This may seem counterintuitive to us as a business, but our goal is to drive down the number of cases we see – because in-house cultures change for the better.

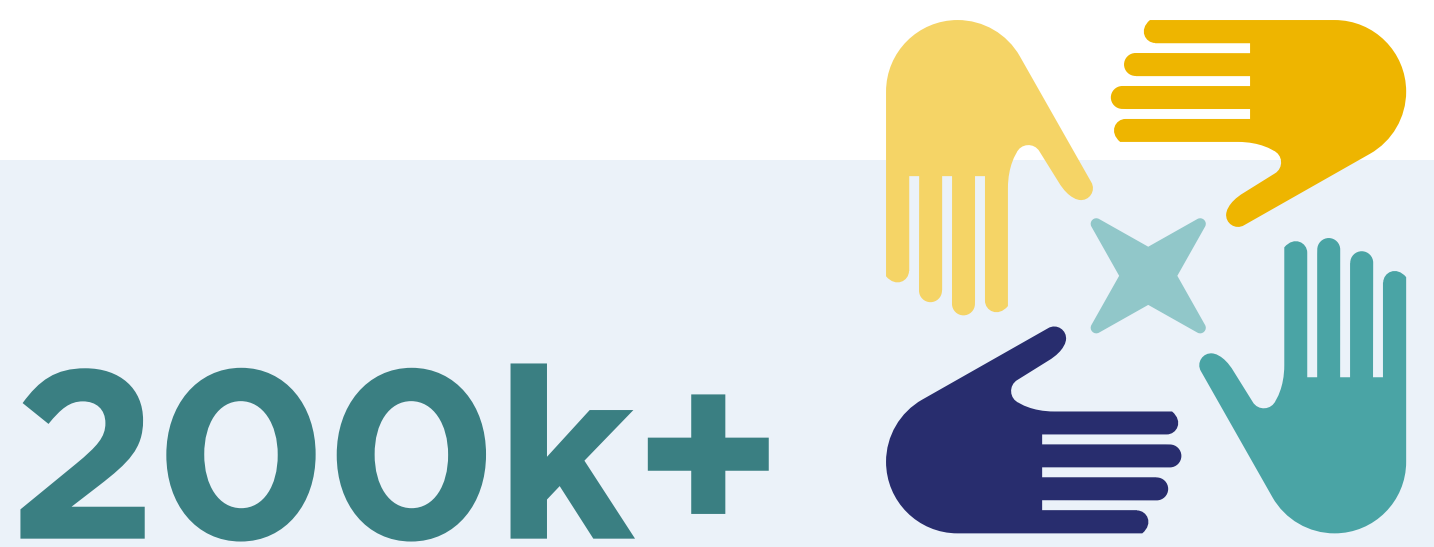
It is exciting to think GSL's role may pivot from a desperately needed safety valve towards being a 'dialogue merchant' supporting businesses to open up their culture and have

honest conversations. This is not pie in the sky because, as this report shows, we see fewer cases in NHS trusts with higher CQC ratings around effective management and leadership. What will not change though is GSL's commitment to being trusted and independent experts supporting open cultures.

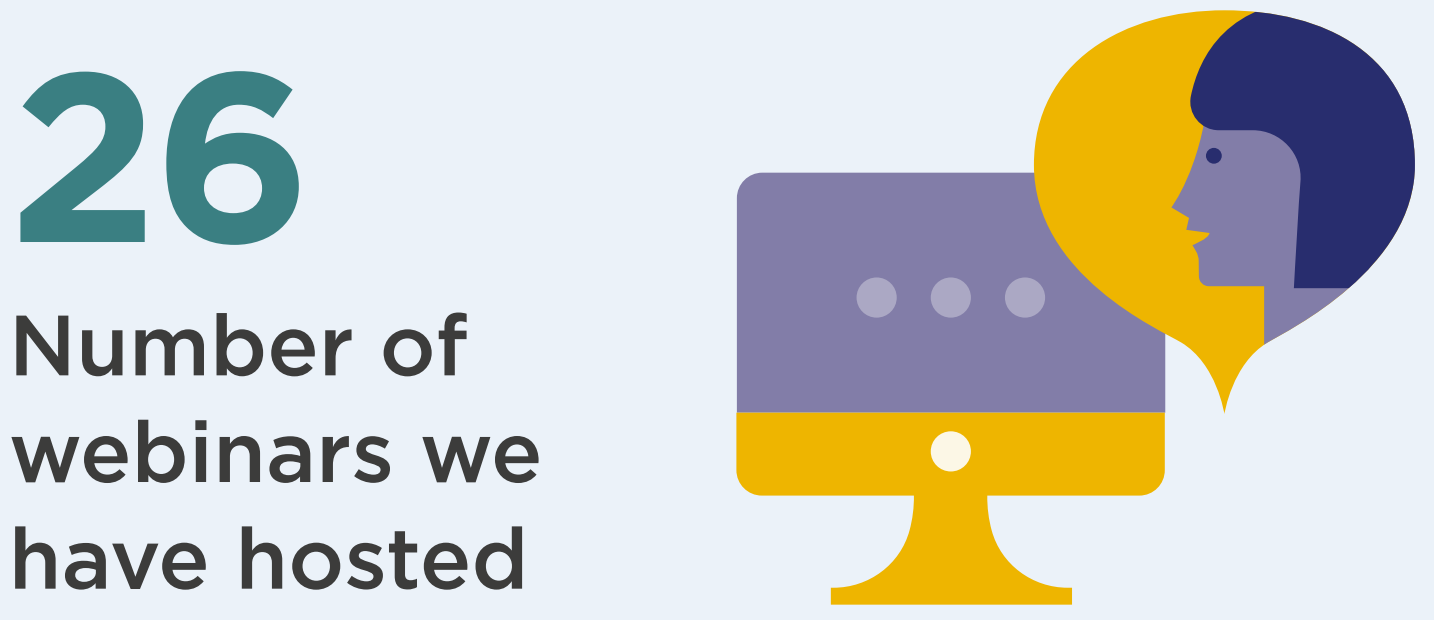
As we move into our next year of business, I would like to thank all of our clients. They have trusted in us and taken the brave step to open themselves up to the independent and impartial support and challenge we provide. This is not always an easy step to take but we know it provides the best results for the NHS workforce that we all rely on and that we should all do our best to support.

Dr Simon Mac Rory
Chief Executive Officer
The Guardian Service

Achievements



Staff currently being supported in NHS trusts and organisations in England, Scotland and Wales



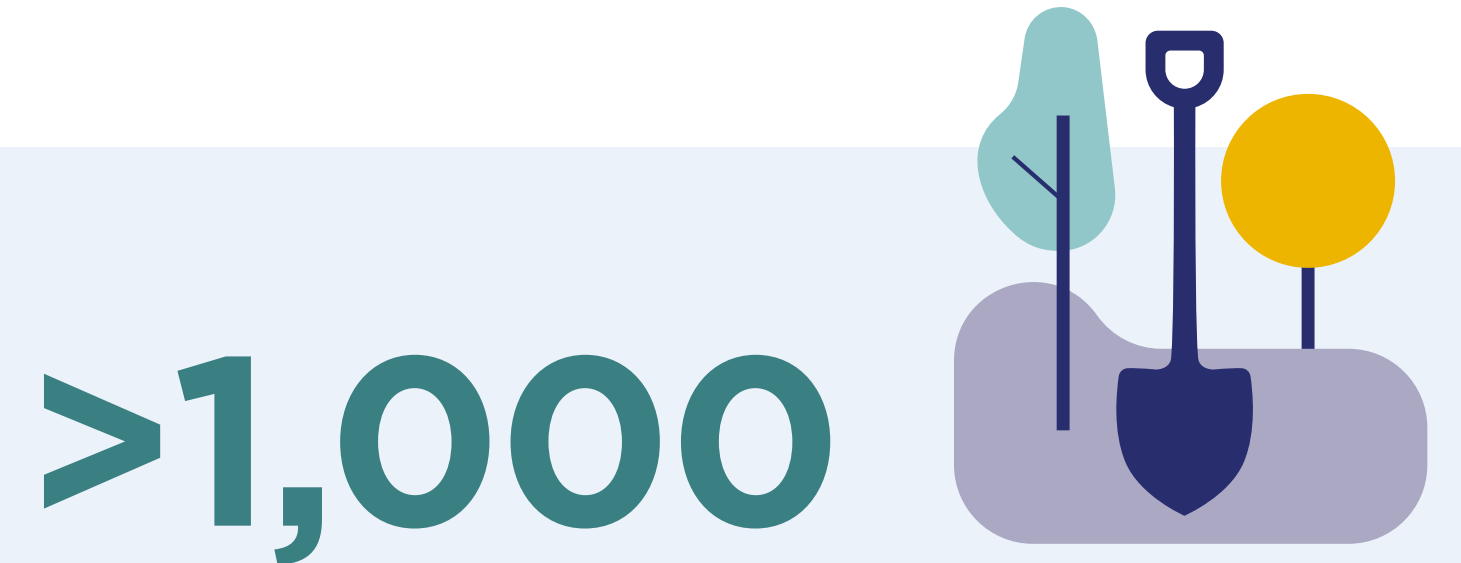
Number of webinars we have hosted



Number of cases GSL Guardians have handled



Number of publications we have issued



Trees planted as part of our corporate and social responsibility activity



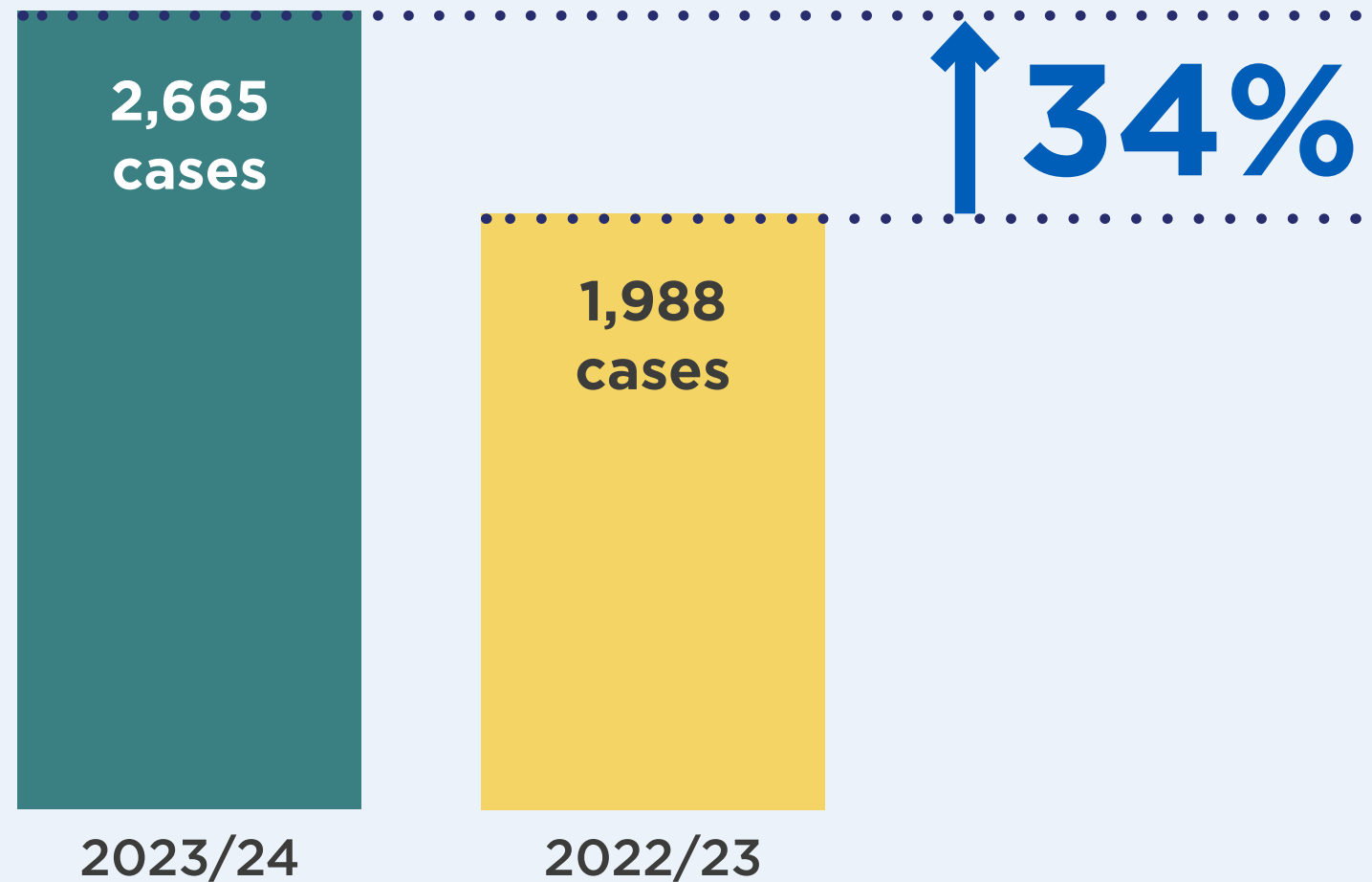
What the data says

With our wide client base, we are able to look at trends and interrogate data in a way that is not possible for individual organisations to do in isolation. We also have the advantage of being able to analyse data across organisations knowing that the Guardian role has been implemented in a consistent way – variability in implementation will always be an issue when trying to draw too many conclusions from national data sets.

We will publish a full data report with more details and look forward to comparing our intelligence with national reports from the National Guardian's Office and others when these become available. From our analysis of 2023/24 trends so far, we have been struck by a number of points.

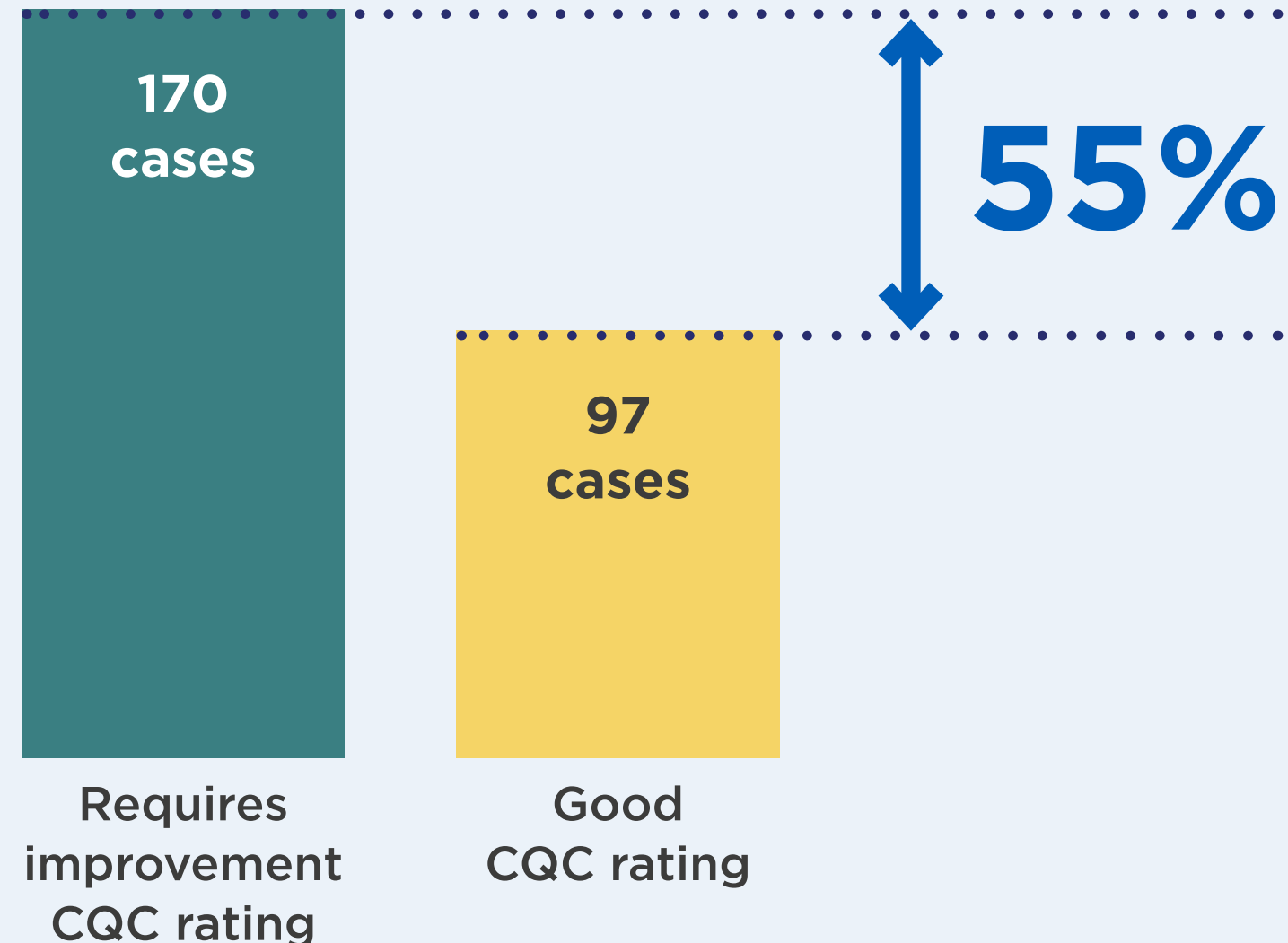
GSL Guardians are handling more cases.

We recorded 2,665 cases during the 2023/24 financial year, compared to 1,988 in 2022/23. This represents a 34% increase in case numbers. This is a startling rise in activity, even accounting for the growth of our client base.



Better service quality correlates with fewer Guardian cases.

We have observed a notable difference in Guardian case numbers between organisations we support rated 'good' by CQC compared to those rated 'requires improvement', with far more cases being recorded in the latter. Looking at overall ratings, the difference between the two is 55%.



What the data says

Better staff experience correlates with fewer Guardian cases.

The NHS staff survey contains several useful indicators of staff perceptions of speaking up culture, not least the measures used to assess the **‘We each have a voice that counts’ People Promise**. We have noted that more Guardian cases are recorded in organisations which perform below their benchmark for this indicator compared to those that perform above it – recording an overall 48% difference between the two. The same trend applies when looking at other survey indicators of speaking up.

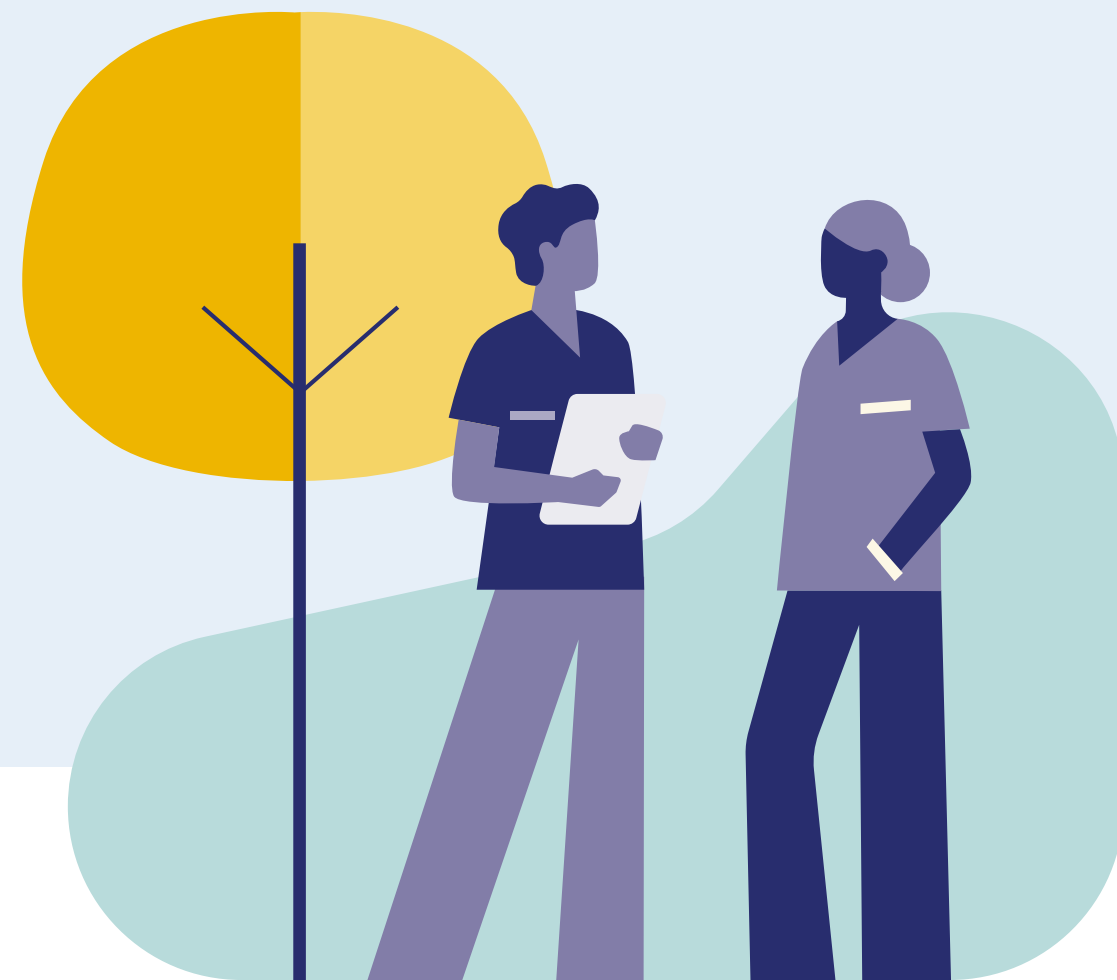
Contact with a Guardian does not always result in escalation via a Guardian.

We know that conversations are powerful and our Guardians take the time to listen and empower workers to take action for themselves wherever possible. This can avoid time-consuming and costly escalation and, more importantly, can result in matters being resolved quickly as ‘close to source’ as possible. During 2023/24, 56% of cases raised to a Guardian did not result in the case needing to be escalated by the Guardian.

Whilst there is more to be done to properly understand what happens to these cases, we believe that many workers who contact our Guardians distressed and with nowhere else to go, find themselves supported, with greater clarity about what to do next and feel equipped to take the next step for themselves. This is not only a better result for those individuals but means that established routes for escalating matters are used appropriately and matters are addressed where and when they need to be addressed.

What does this mean?

As with all data sets, our findings probably ask as many questions as they answer. There is more work to be done and we would like to work collaboratively with others to get under the surface of the trends we are seeing. However, we are not surprised by the correlations we have observed. Positive staff experience in better run organisations should mean more empowered staff, more speaking up happening as part of everyday dialogue, and less reliance on the need for Guardian ‘cover’ to escalate a matter of concern. In turn, healthy everyday dialogue will improve staff experience and lead to better service quality.



Working collaboratively: The GSL Alliance



The GSL Alliance represents a significant step in our journey towards providing a holistic range of services and support. It is also a place where the good work of the organisations we support can be recognised and a means of amplifying their voice so that, collectively, we can contribute to making the health and care sector a better place for the workforce on a wider scale.

We held two meetings for Alliance members this year and have identified a number of areas where members are seeking more guidance and support. We provide regular updates on our work and are establishing a range of networks to bring together subject-matter specialists as we work collaboratively to learn from each other and establish best practice.

GSL Alliance Terms of Reference:

- Work together collaboratively to improve workplace culture
- Influence at the system and national level to drive consistency and improve the quality of Guardian services
- Work in partnership to improve and develop GSL services
- Provide a sounding board and safe space for collective learning and improvement

Contributing to the knowledge base



To date, we have published a total of 13 reports, toolkits and guides.

Our publications are a means for us to respond to cultural matters that come to the fore both within health and across other sectors. We look at what others are finding through the lens of speaking up, use them to inform our own practice, and highlight the lessons we can see that have wider implications. There are always lessons to be learnt and we hope our publications, which draw from our extensive knowledge and experience in all things speaking up, will shape the future.

The call for evidence from the Health and Social Care Select Committee to inform their Inquiry into NHS leadership, performance and patient safety was a key opportunity for us to describe our experience of how speaking up has evolved and highlight aspects of how this is being driven nationally need to change.

[You can find our response here](#)

Corporate and social responsibility

We are committed to corporate socially responsible (CSR) business practices and believe companies that can do more, should. In 2023, we set out five pillars of commitments for creating a positive social, economic and environmental impact across our communities and further afield.

Our partnership volunteering programme with Citizens Advice began earlier this year with the first cohort of GSL staff participating in skill-sharing sessions with nearly 60 Citizens Advice staff across their regional communities. We encourage our employees – through two days of paid time off – to donate their time and skills to support this programme of volunteering and have a positive impact on our communities.

**citizens
advice**

Our impact through the micro-lending platform Kiva has helped improve livelihoods around the world without access to banking and living in under-served communities. We have provided financial access to seven countries, with a particular focus on supporting businesses trying to provide medical and pharmaceutical supplies and funding individuals to achieve higher education in the medical field. This coming year, we will be widening our support to community-based organisations here in the UK to support medical education opportunities for overseas students and those from diverse backgrounds through a company matched-giving scheme.

kiva

Corporate and social responsibility

Our efforts to grow our business sustainably include annual staff mileage analysis to keep track of our emissions, switching to eco-friendly brand marketing materials and finding more innovative ways to promote our business by stepping away from disposable material items. In one year, we have planted over 1,000 trees in our company Impact Forest in partnership with eco-company Brynk. Sadly, due to financial challenges Brynk have now ceased operations leading us to partner up with 'Ecologi'. We are working with Ecologi to reach our target of being net-zero by 2050 through a calculated carbon footprint analysis and tracking and reporting transparently on our progress.



The wellbeing of our staff is paramount, and we continue to provide health and wellbeing resources including bi-annual psychological counselling, Mental Health First Aider training and regular peer support meetings to have open discussions and support with and from colleagues. We have increased our health care cash plan benefits for staff with HSF Health Plan to give our staff increased access to affordable health cover for themselves and their families.

We're proud to be an accredited Living Wage Employer for the second year running and this year will be looking to expand our accreditations in line with our Diversity, Equality and Inclusion commitments.



We are working with Ecologi to reach our target of being net-zero by 2050 through a calculated carbon footprint analysis and tracking and reporting transparently on our progress.

Find out more



You can learn more about us on our website:
theguardianservice.co.uk



You can find our research and papers here:
theguardianservice.co.uk/research-and-papers



You can also contact us at:
information@theguardianservice.co.uk



Telephone:
0333 999 8922



Head office:
8 Devonshire Square, London EC2M 4PL



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[/the-guardian-service](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-guardian-service)



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