Opening Cultures, Transforming Outcomes

Annual Report and Strategic Insights 2025/26



Open culture.
Expertly delivered.

Success starts
with openness.

We'll help you
build it.

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Foreword

Dr Simon Mac Rory
Chief Executive Officer
The Guardian Service

Opening cultures, transforming outcomes

For over a decade, The Guardian Service (GSL) has operated on a foundational truth: when people feel safe to speak up, healthcare organisations perform better, staff thrive, and lives are saved.

Through our Freedom to Speak Up (FTSU) services, we have supported hundreds of organisations and hundreds of thousands of workers across the UK. As the national landscape surrounding speaking up evolves and oversight arrangements shift, GSL's role as the leading independent provider has never been more vital. We are now in a unique position nationally to provide the consistent support, insight, deep expertise, and unwavering integrity that healthcare leaders rely on to truly understand their workplace culture.

The past year marks a transformational chapter in our story as we move beyond supporting compliance to offering a wrap-around service that can raise organisational capability to open up culture and turn insight into meaningful change.

Open culture saves lives: current NHS culture increases risk

As major inquiries – from Ockendon to Thirlwall – continue to expose, the NHS remains trapped in a cycle of repeated failures, preventable harm, and tragic outcomes. As the report authors – and us – repeat ad-nauseum, the core issue is not a lack of rules or oversight; it is culture. Put simply – closed cultures kill. No other sector could operate with such seeming systemic impunity, responding to tragedy by generating hundreds of micro-managed recommendations rather than fixing the underlying problem.

In our landmark report, Open Culture in the NHS, senior leaders voiced frustration with a system that measures problems rather than solving them. More reports and endless action plans will not fix this. National bodies – including NHSE, the CQC, and DHSC – must lead by example and set an environment that supports real change rather than hindering it.

"At what point do we stop legislating the problem and just fix the culture? Openness is not a compliance exercise – it is a life-saving necessity. We are committed to helping leaders move past procedural tick-boxes to create environments where every voice matters and learning is immediate."

— Dr. Simon Mac Rory, CEO

Opportunity from the changing national landscape

There is hope. Implementation of the Dash review and the disbandment of the National Guardian's Office (NGO) mark a necessary shift away from distant, top-down bureaucracy. GSL fully supports this rationalisation. Removing questionable, uncosted national guidance returns responsibility to local leaders – where real cultural change happens.

Local accountability will work when it is built on genuine trust. Internal speaking-up arrangements will never be fully trusted by staff who fear reprisal or expect inaction. True independence remains non-negotiable.

"Openness is not a static policy; it is an everyday practice. Whether supporting a single primary care practice, a single NHS trust or a wider neighbourhood, our purpose remains constant: ensuring every voice matters and every organisation learns."

— Dr. Simon Mac Rory, CEO

Key strategic milestones and outcomes in 2025/26

- **Focusing on outcomes over activity:** Urging national regulators to stop prescribing rigid processes and focus on actual workforce safety, openness, and clinical impact.
- **Expanding our independent reach:** Over 400,000 NHS staff are now supported by GSL.
- **Leading open culture support:** Moving beyond baseline FTSU practices to deliver dialogue training, culture audits, and executive L&D that turn safe speaking up into continuous organisational learning.
- **Generating fresh insight:** Using our expanding and unique dataset to identify systematic issues across our client base and creating the new GSL FTSU Index as a true measure of open culture.
- **Influencing the debate:** Publishing data reports, submitting evidence and expert commentary on major milestones to shape the national debate on culture and safety.

2025/26 in numbers – GSL's scale, reach, and trust

GSL's growth over the past year reflects an urgent sector-wide demand for truly independent, outcome-focused open culture solutions.

428
organisations supported
Up 1,327% year-on-year as we expand into primary care.

400,000+
workers covered
Comprehensive coverage across NHS services.

+4,000
cases managed
A 17% increase in caseload handled by our Guardians.

130,000+
direct interactions
50,000 case-linked contacts and 80,000 staff reached via awareness sessions.

98%
recommendation rate
Verified user satisfaction from staff using our independent service.

Client breakdown across NHS

389

Primary care surgeries
Scalable arrangements supporting general practice.

33

NHS provider trusts
Acute, mental health, and community trusts embedding independent FTSU routes.

4

Governing & emergency bodies
Independent assurance for high-risk, high-pressure operational environments and organisations with regulatory responsibility.

1

Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)
System-wide culture transformation and standardised speaking up frameworks.

1

Community services providers
Extension of speaking up principles to those who work in community settings.

The GSL team – expertise, independence and diversity

GSL's strength rests on an independent, diverse, and multidisciplinary workforce that mirrors the health and care staff we protect.

29%

overall increase in GSL staffing

58

total staff members

Delivering comprehensive guardian services, consultancy, training, data analysis, and operational support.

40

FTSU Guardians from diverse backgrounds

Offering round-the-clock (24/7/365) independent availability across the UK.



"Diversity is not just a metric to celebrate; it is fundamental to how we build trust. By bringing together colleagues with varied backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, we ensure our Guardians listen without judgment, challenge assumptions, and break down systemic barriers to speaking up."

— Julie McAndrew, GSL Business Partner, HR and Contracts

Living our values – responsible employer and corporate social responsibility

Creating open cultures externally requires GSL to model exemplary workplace standards, ethical governance, and social responsibility internally.

Employer standards

- **Disability Confident accredited:** Maintaining accredited workplace inclusion, removing structural barriers, and supporting all staff to flourish.
- **Internal psychological safety:** Ensuring our own teams experience the open dialogue and continuous learning we advocate for clients.

"The opportunities GSL offers are truly inspiring and make a meaningful difference to our learners' aspirations... We value this collaboration immensely."

— Karen Rance, Director of Learning, East Surrey College

Corporate Social Responsibility: "Find Your Voice"

Launched in 2026, "Find Your Voice" provides every employee with two paid volunteering days per year to work with young adults entering the workforce. The initiative builds early-career confidence for participants to speak up, express ideas, and promote open cultures from day one.

Environmental & social impact

- **Ecologi Partnership:** 1,110+ trees planted across 16 global projects; 183 tCO2e emissions prevented. Committed to Net Zero by 2050.
- **Sustainable supply chain:** Partnered with HelloPrint for eco-friendly paper stationery distributed directly at staff events to eliminate shipping footprints.
- **Kiva Micro-Lending:** Contributed $3,850 in micro-loans to date, supporting 36 unbanked entrepreneurs across 16 developing nations.

Proof of impact – transforming culture at scale

CASE STUDY
Multi-site health system integration

The challenge
A provider covering a wide geography with cultural silos, and inconsistent access to speaking up channels.

The GSL solution
Implemented a unified, 24/7 independent Guardian service.

The outcomes

- **Surfacing hidden risk:** A steady increase in case numbers demonstrated workforce trust.
- **CQC validation:** Care Quality Commission inspectors formally commended the well-functioning, independent FTSU framework and supportive leadership behaviours.
- **Staff survey improvement:** Measurable improvements recorded in NHS Staff Survey scores relating to confidence in speaking up.

"The confirmation that the FTSU service is now external provided extra reassurance, and the Guardian made me feel comfortable to talk about my concerns from the initial contact."

— Frontline healthcare worker

Governance, quality and future responsibility

Robust quality assurance

- **ISO/IEC 27001:2022 Certified:** Certified Information Security Management System guaranteeing complete confidentiality and data protection.
- **Integrated Quality Management System (QMS):** Combining compliance, risk management, internal audits, and client feedback into a continuous improvement loop.

Strategic offerings for 2026/27

- **Dialogue training programmes:** Developing local capability to listen effectively and act on feedback.
- **Standards and culture reviews:** Independent evaluations measuring organisational culture against best practices.
- **System-wide benchmarking:** Providing cross-sector comparative insights to guide region-wide cultural strategy.



Every Voice Matters.
Every Organisation Learns.

With over 13 years' experience of providing Freedom to Speak Up services, we know how important it is to listen, and how hard it can be to turn listening into trusted dialogue and visible action. If you have comments on this report, want to continue the conversation, or are interested in how we may be able to support your organisation to open up its culture, please get in touch.

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