



Wellbeing Guardians on the board:

how board members
can work with and
support the wellbeing
guardian to create a
culture of wellbeing.



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About this resource

This guidance is for NHS boards and wellbeing guardians in large healthcare provider organisations. It outlines how all board members play a role in supporting the wellbeing guardian to create a culture of wellbeing and supports the national [wellbeing guardians guidance](#) by NHS England and NHS Improvement and the [guidance](#) created by NHS Employers.



Introduction

Having a wellbeing guardian on your board and working with them, will help your senior leaders make sure the health and wellbeing of your employees is at the heart of your organisational strategy. Working with and fully supporting your wellbeing guardian will help ensure the role is embedded in your organisation and will be as effective as possible.

Now more than ever, supporting the health and wellbeing of our employees and ensuring we create a positive experience in which they can not only deliver their work, but also thrive and develop in the workplace is fundamental. Where this is most successful, the workforce is integral to an organisation/system's overall strategy, ensuring that our employees are at the centre of what we do.

[Evidence](#) tells us that those in caring roles often wait until they become unwell or very unwell before raising their hand and seeking support. The [NHS People Promise](#), within the [NHS People Plan](#), aims to improve the experience of working in the NHS for everyone. If we don't look after ourselves, and each other, we cannot deliver safe, high-quality care. This is a promise we must all make to each other and actively support each other to achieve this by encouraging everyone to look after themselves, each other and to speak up and seek help as soon as it is needed.

NHS board members have distinct roles, but share corporate responsibilities for formulating strategy, ensuring accountability, and creating a culture of wellbeing. The NHS People Plan champions the advice within the 2019 Health Education England NHS Staff and Learners' Mental Wellbeing report and the creation of board-level NHS wellbeing guardians to support the board with this shared responsibility for employee wellbeing.

Creating a culture of wellbeing is not the responsibility of the wellbeing guardian role. It is a shared responsibility of the entire board and all senior leaders. Working together to achieve this will enable all employees to feel cared for and pass this care onto their patients.



What is a Wellbeing Guardian?

The NHS People Plan outlines that all healthcare organisations should have a wellbeing guardian. The wellbeing guardian is best suited to a non-executive director (NED) in large provider organisations or an equivalent role, that enables the independent challenge to the senior leadership team and can hold them to account for their corporate role in creating a culture of wellbeing for all employees.

They provide an assurance role to the board and will act as a critical friend. It is important to note that the primary responsibility for our people's health and wellbeing lies with the chief executive, but ultimately, we know health and wellbeing is everyone's responsibility and is most effectively supported when a clear commitment, strategy and collective responsibility is taken to constantly prioritise it.

They provide an assurance role to the board and will act as a critical friend

A wellbeing guardian's role is to check, respectfully challenge and seek assurance that the health and wellbeing of the organisation is embedded throughout and that each board member is putting the health and wellbeing of the organisation and its people front and centre. They will also champion equality, diversity and inclusion to ensure all voices are represented and heard across the organisation and within the board.

Your wellbeing guardian will most likely be a NED, and as NED roles within NHS organisations are part time, it is important to make sure that the asks of the wellbeing guardian are realistic given the amount of time they are in the organisation/working on the role.

They will influence the board both within the organisation and externally through their values, behaviours, and expertise. They will act as a critical friend to constructively challenge decisions of the board and encourage the board to place employee wellbeing at the heart of all that they do.

They will attend all board meetings (virtually or in-person) and look at the organisational activities and board level decisions from a health and wellbeing perspective. Looking at data and insights of the organisation's people and performance activities through a health and wellbeing lens, can prompt and hold the board/senior leadership team to account for undertaking improvement work, such as training provision, opportunities for staff feedback and showing an ethos of supporting work/life balance of staff. It will ensure that the board is considering employee wellbeing with every decision it makes, such as when creating organisational strategy, agreeing business plans, or endorsing service improvement activities.

Where possible, they will participate in regional and national wellbeing guardian networks to maximise the opportunity for system wide partnerships and cross-organisational learning.

It is important to note that the wellbeing guardian role is a strategic role championing employee wellbeing at the board and not an operational 'doing' role. As it is likely undertaken by a NED (or similar) working part time, the person in this role **will not** have capacity to:

- take on executive / management responsibilities for ensuring wellbeing policies are operationally actioned and delivered
- get involved in 'the doing', operational management, or individual staff cases
- personally collect, analyse, or present data on wellbeing

This means that the organisation needs to ensure that the wellbeing guardian has a team of people supporting them operationally. Some wellbeing guardians within NHS organisations may choose to be visible to their people and may be well known and feel approachable. Whilst this fosters an open and positive culture and will keep the guardian connected to the wellbeing needs of employees, in these instances, it is important that the wellbeing guardian is not an operational support role.

Creating a [network of wellbeing champions](#) can act as the eyes and ears of the wellbeing guardian, whilst also acting as the day-to-day wellbeing support for colleagues within their teams and work areas. Guardians can also signpost to the organisation's people function including, line managers, health and wellbeing leads, organisation development (OD) leads, human resources (HR), freedom to speak up (FTSU) guardians and occupational health (OH) to allow the employees to get the right support they may need.

Wellbeing guardians will also act as an ambassador for their organisation and establish key relationships, develop networks and contacts to support the ongoing development of the role within the organisation. The wellbeing guardians external influence may include participating in professional networks, attending national advisory boards, and representing own views and those of peers and organisational colleagues in these.

External relationships may link with:

- NHS England and NHS Improvement
- NHS Employers
- NHS Integrated Care Systems
- NHS wellbeing guardian networks
- NHS health and wellbeing leads
- NHS staff networks
- NHS England and NHS Improvement regional leads
- HRD networks



Chair



Chief Executive



HR Director



Finance Director



Medical Director



Nursing Director



Non-Executive Directors

How board members can support the wellbeing guardian

The wellbeing guardian is an assurance role and not an operational role. They rely on their peer board members and senior leadership team colleagues to ensure that the organisation is creating a wellbeing culture for all of their people to thrive.

This section outlines how each board member can benefit from, and work with, the wellbeing guardian to create a culture of wellbeing.

It is important that all board members work with and support the wellbeing guardian by:

- ensuring every decision at the board has considered the impact on employee wellbeing
- supporting the creation and implementation of an organisational employee wellbeing strategy and improvement plan
- sharing knowledge and learning to provide insight and ensure they support the creation of culture of wellbeing
- provide opportunities for the wellbeing guardian to get a sense of the true picture of what it is like for our NHS people
- highlight the challenges and opportunities their role and work area face regarding health and wellbeing
- raise health and wellbeing issues, challenges, stories at the ringfenced time on the agenda to participate in the conversation on health and wellbeing
- sharing knowledge, skills, and experience with the wellbeing guardian, educating them on how the directorate is aligning with the health and wellbeing strategy to take action to support the mental health and wellbeing of our NHS people.



Chair

Working with the CEO will allow the organisation to appoint a wellbeing guardian who is competent and confident in their ability to challenge the board. It is vital that the wellbeing guardian champions equality, diversity, and inclusion.

It is important that there is ringfenced space to discuss employee wellbeing on the agenda at all board meetings. The wellbeing guardian may lead these discussions; however, the chair will remind the board that wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone.

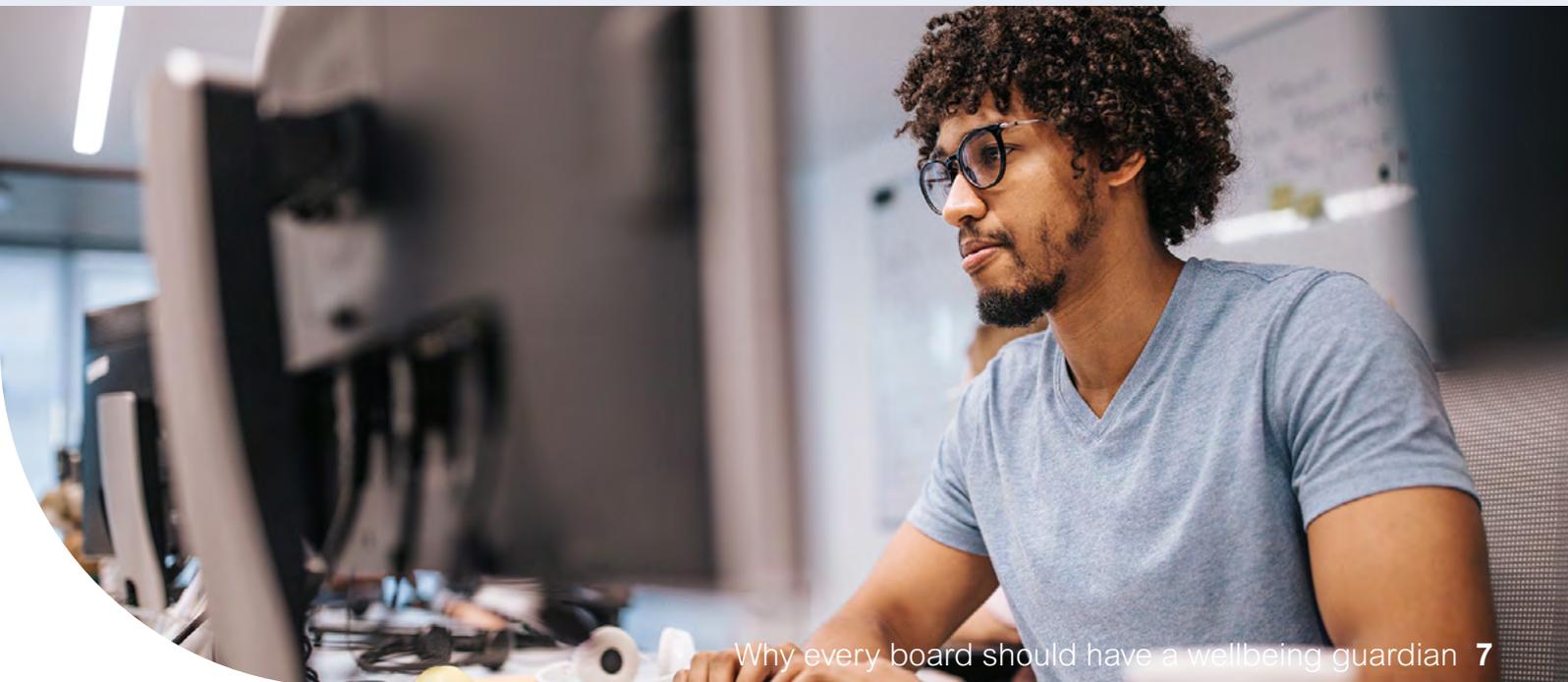
Giving the wellbeing guardian space on the agenda to ask questions, seek assurance and challenge how board leads are ensuring the wellbeing of their people remains a priority and allows them to gain insights into the health and wellbeing of the organisation.

Empower your wellbeing guardian to hold the board to account.

Ensure the board leadership team constantly ask, 'how does this decision impact the wellbeing of our employees' and how can we keep improving the wellbeing of our workforce?'

As your wellbeing guardian may be from outside the healthcare sector, it is important that board members share their expertise, experience, knowledge and learning in healthcare to make sure the wellbeing guardian role is as effective as possible.

Allows them to gain insights into the health and wellbeing of the organisation





Chief Executive

Working with the chair to recruit a wellbeing guardian onto your board will help you, and your senior leaders, make sure the health and wellbeing of your employees is at the heart of your organisational strategy and to help you to create an effective wellbeing culture. Working with and fully supporting your wellbeing guardian will help ensure the role is fully embedded in your organisation and is as effective as possible.

Appointing a wellbeing guardian who is competent and confident in their ability, will allow them to challenge the executive/senior leader team on behalf of the board.

It is important to ensure that your wellbeing guardian has a voice at every board meeting.

Building a relationship with your wellbeing guardian is important. They are encouraged to act as a critical friend, giving them permission to challenge you and your board on wellbeing issues within your organisation in order to enhance a positive staff experience.

Building a relationship with your wellbeing guardian is important

A wellbeing guardian will help you to strategically sense check the organisations wellbeing agenda and will prompt improvement or developmental action where needed. Working closely with you and the board, they will seek assurance from you that your organisation considers the needs of the diverse groups within your workforce and adapts holistic approaches to wellbeing, appreciating peoples changing needs over time.

It is important that the wellbeing guardian has permission to, and is encouraged to, look at your available data to see what's happening within health and wellbeing within your organisation (the wellbeing guardian will not personally collect, analyse, or present this data on wellbeing to your board, this is purely so the wellbeing guardian can get an overview of the organisation's wellbeing position). It is important that the board analyse and present the wellbeing data to your wellbeing guardian which may allow the wellbeing guardian to seek assurance from the whole board on how your organisation enables and supports the wellbeing of its employees.



HR

Director

The HR director (HRD) should collaborate and work closely in partnership with the wellbeing guardian to assess the organisation's health and wellbeing agenda and offers.

You should ensure wellbeing is placed at the centre of people strategies to make sure the board is creating a wellbeing culture for employees to thrive. The wellbeing guardian can be a critical friend in developing and assuring your people strategy/health and wellbeing strategy is delivering the productivity of a healthy, happy, and engaged workforce and is being supported to do so through all your executive functions.

The wellbeing guardian role is an assurance role and is not necessarily an expert in wellbeing. Your role as HRD is key in helping the wellbeing guardian analyse your organisation's data on wellbeing, understand together what this is telling you/your organisation, using this to create your health and wellbeing strategy, operationalising the associated interventions, and feeding back the impact evaluation as the strategy evolves.

Where possible, the HRD could allow the wellbeing guardian to challenge and question support and opportunities offered to staff and check in with staff to see what impact these opportunities are having on their overall motivation, skills, and wellbeing.

The HRD can utilise the NHS [Health and Wellbeing Framework Toolkit](#) to provide the wellbeing guardian assurance that the organisation is creating a culture of wellbeing, from all employees having meaningful and regular [wellbeing conversations](#) through to ensuring the organisation has a strategic and integrated [Occupational Health](#) service that is adding value. The wellbeing guardian has the potential to be a supportive voice, strengthening the ability of the HRD to create a culture of wellbeing in a practical way.

Sharing information on national strategies, initiatives and policies including the NHS People Plan would be a great opportunity for the wellbeing guardian to sense check and ask key questions on how this could impact on staff wellbeing.

As HRD, you can help your wellbeing guardian navigate opportunities to understand the wellbeing of the workforce while being conscious that their time is limited. For example, they may benefit from attending some wellbeing events such as workshops, coffee mornings and drop-in sessions, which will help to provide a more accurate picture of the wellbeing of your employees.

Providing clear data that assesses and measures the impact of successful wellbeing initiatives can help guide the wellbeing guardian in directing future efforts and resources within health and wellbeing.



Finance Director

The finance director can support the wellbeing guardian by ensuring that the health and wellbeing of employees is well resourced, understanding that all the evidence demonstrates that looking after the wellbeing of our employees leads to better performance and higher quality patient care.

You could share financial data reports to allow the wellbeing guardian to see where previous money from the budget has been spent within the health and wellbeing space and to help inform future spending.

Similarly, the wellbeing guardian could be asked which areas of health and wellbeing the organisation could benefit from financial investment and ensure they are part of financial forecasting conversations.

Presenting ideas in board meetings of how health and wellbeing can be incorporated into future refurbishment and building plans could be beneficial. For instance, quiet spaces for breaks, [welfare facilities](#) such as showers and locker rooms, on site gyms/exercise areas, garden areas, kitchen facilities, hydration stations could be suggested and considered. Hearing what staff need to enhance their health and wellbeing means you can incorporate these elements into larger scale financial investments happening within the organisation.

Hearing what staff need to enhance their health and wellbeing

As finance director, you can help your wellbeing guardian make sure the organisation is creating a culture of health and wellbeing by ensuring that in all financial investments and service improvement, the wellbeing of staff is considered and incorporated into these investment projects.

Finance directors could focus their attention on the NHS's finance professional development strategy, affiliated with ['Our NHS Finance'](#). The [future-focused finance programme 2021-2026](#) aims to deliver health and wellbeing events, support health and wellbeing champions as well as providing support to staff when returning to the office and moving towards hybrid working solutions, all of which impact on staff health and wellbeing. These areas that are receiving the financial focus will be of interest to the wellbeing guardian.



Medical Director

There is great scope and value for the medical director to connect, work with and support the wellbeing guardian. The evidence is clear, that caring for the wellbeing of our employees enables them to thrive at work and equally pass that care onto our patients. Burnout and chronic workplace stress are detrimental on clinical employee's health and wellbeing, which can impact on patient safety. Prioritising wellbeing can increase staff happiness and engagement levels, leading to higher compassion and provide safer care.

As medical director, it is important that you champion the importance of health and wellbeing, not only for yourself, but for your colleagues. Ensuring the basics of your own and your employees wellbeing is met, encourage yourself and your employees to take time to [rest, rehydrate and refuel](#), which is of equal priority to patient care.

It is also important to link with your guardian of safe working hours where you can access health and wellbeing information from their reports.

You should build in health and wellbeing when producing medical workforce plans, education, and training plans, and provide assurance to the wellbeing guardian that this is being done continually.



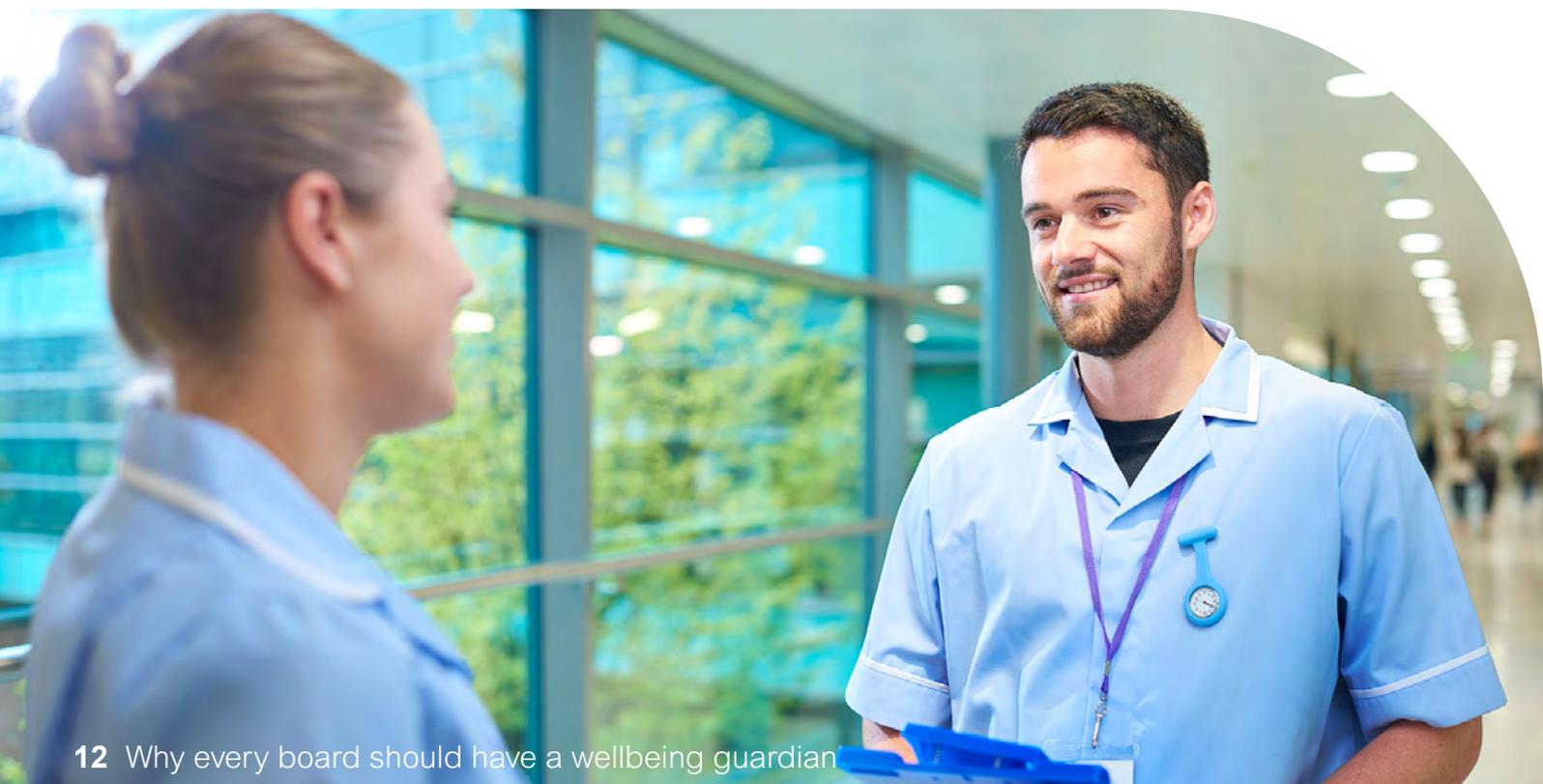


Nursing Director

As nursing director, it is likely that you hold responsibility for the largest workforce in your organisation and therefore there is great value for you to work with and support your wellbeing guardian, so your employees are emotionally and physically well and feel cared for.

Your knowledge and expertise of the nursing directorate and workforce will enable meaningful conversations with the wellbeing guardian, allowing them to work together to increase the overall health and wellbeing of nursing staff.

The nursing director and wellbeing guardian can work together to ensure strategic wellbeing initiatives are fully operationalised, such as [rest, rehydrate and refuelling](#), having meaningful and regular [health and wellbeing conversations](#), access to a strong network of [health and wellbeing champions](#) and whether employees feel they have sufficient [welfare facilities](#) on site to fulfil their shifts to work comfortably and safely. Ensuring these are in place is of equal priority to patient care as safer staffing requirements are required to deliver high-quality and safe patient care.





Non-Executive Directors

✔ **Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) play an important role in support the wellbeing guardian by ensuring employee wellbeing is considered at every board meeting.**

As each NED will likely hold a variety of different organisational portfolio leadership roles and may chair various related sub-committees, networks and meetings, they can also ensure that wellbeing is considered as integral to these. You can also report back to the wellbeing guardian on employee wellbeing issues and opportunities identified within these sub-committees. This will ensure that wellbeing is championed strategically beyond the board and as part of wider organisational activities, programmes of work and interventions.

*Wellbeing is
championed
strategically
beyond the
board*

NEDs can work with and support the wellbeing guardian by transferring skills, knowledge, and abilities across from personal and professional experiences, and provide expertise and perspective to add value to the role. Their role as a NED means drawing on a wealth of experience in non-NHS employment and professions to help facilitate partnership working and transformational change within workforce health and wellbeing.

Sense checking any ideas or developments presented by the wellbeing guardian allows NEDs to give a balanced perspective.



Freedom to speak up guardian

Whilst the wellbeing guardian and the [freedom to speak up \(FTSU\) guardian](#) have similar titles, their roles within the organisation have a different focus.

FTSU guardians provide an additional channel for any worker to speak up about anything that is affecting their ability to do a great job, including issues that impact on or could improve patient care, their own experience or that of colleagues. FTSU guardians support workers to speak up when they feel unable to use established routes such as line management. They ensure that workers are thanked, listened to, and receive feedback.

As stated previously, some wellbeing guardians and NEDs within NHS organisations are visible to its people and may be well known and feel approachable. Whilst this fosters an open and positive culture, in these instances, it is important that the wellbeing guardian signposts to the organisations people function including line managers, health and wellbeing leads, organisation development (OD) leads, HR, freedom to speak up guardians and occupational health to allow the person/people to get the right support they may need.

The wellbeing guardian will not have the personal capacity to liaise with employees about their wellbeing concerns, instead, will rely on data and feedback from other sources. The FTSU guardian can share the themes relating to the health, wellbeing, and safety issues of its people with the wellbeing guardian which is very important to ensure that the organisation is supporting the wellbeing of its people.

Intelligence from the cases brought to FTSU guardians is [reported nationally](#) and shared regularly with senior leaders to inform learning and generate improvement. The wellbeing guardian will be interested in themes arising where these intersect with their area of responsibility. FTSU guardians also work proactively to help their organisations identify and reduce barriers to speaking up. Although they are usually employed by the organisations they support, their role is independent and impartial.

FTSU guardians exist in many settings including in NHS trusts, national bodies, regulators, independent and primary care providers and are required to be appointed by organisations providing services under the NHS Standard Contract. NHS trusts have a FTSU guardian, a FTSU executive lead and a non-executive FTSU lead.

The non-executive FTSU lead is responsible for challenging the chief executive, executive lead for FTSU and the board to reflect on whether they could do more to create a healthy and effective speaking up culture. They can act as an alternative source of advice and support for the FTSU guardian and may oversee speaking up matters regarding board members. More information on these roles can be found on the NHS England and NHS Improvement's [Freedom to Speak Up: Guidance for NHS trust and NHS foundation trust boards resources](#).

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