

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian – Speak Up, Listen Up, Follow Up

Date: 3 March 2025

Report of: Director of Strategy and Resources

Report to: Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

Brief summary

This report on the work of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian (FTSUG) supports item 8 which taken together form part of a suite of reports updating the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion activity in 2024/25 and setting out future plans for the coming municipal year.

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian supports the organisation to create a positive culture of 'speaking up,' trust and inclusion, linked to the council's values. They also work to protect customer safety and the quality of service, improve the overall experience for employees and promote learning and improvement. The role complements and works in line with existing Whistle Blowing policy and other parts of the council's staff voice and influence framework (such as staff networks, staff surveys and trade unions). The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role has strong anti-discriminatory values and a demonstrable commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion. In line with national guidance, the Guardian is expected to demonstrate the following behaviours:

- Courage - speaking truthfully and challenging appropriately
- Impartiality - remaining objective and unbiased
- Empathy - listening well and acting with sensitivity
- Learning - seeking and providing feedback and looking for opportunities to improve

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian stands alongside the other routes colleagues have to speak up and raise concerns to the organisation such as: trade unions, staff networks, line managers / senior leaders, contacting the chief executive, internal audit (whistleblowing) and formal HR processes. As such, the addition of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has enriched rather than replaced the Council's voice and influence mechanisms.

Recommendations

- a) The Board is asked to note and comment on this update report from the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and identify any future scrutiny activity linked to it.

What is this report about?

- 1 In July 2022, Leeds City Council were the first council in the country to appoint a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. The appointment of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian reflects a positive and sector leading approach to giving everyone a voice and reinforcing the importance of the Council's values and behaviours. The purpose of the role is to have a direct line of communication and feedback on behalf of others to the Chief Executive and the CLT (Corporate Leadership Team), as well as to influence and deliver programmes of strategic significance to the Council's organisational culture in order to deliver services in line with Council priorities and values.
- 2 Wherever possible the Council has made best endeavours to align both strategic and operational practices with the guidelines set by the National Guardian's Office. However, this is the first time that a Freedom to Speak Guardian has operated in a local authority setting; as such, there are elements of the existing guidance that has required some adaptation. Supported by relevant Executive Members, there is a strong commitment across the council's corporate leadership to getting the foundations of Freedom to Speak up right so that it may serve its purpose in enabling colleagues to have a voice and contribute towards positive change and enabling all colleagues to be their best. However, the size and complexity of the organisation does pose challenges around consistency and getting everyone's speaking up experience right.

Why Leeds? Why Now? – The context of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Role in Leeds

- 3 The reasons why Leeds chose to appoint a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian are multifaceted but find its routes within calls to action from staff voice and influence, particularly in relation to staff race equality across the organisation.
- 4 Over the past 5 years, we have witnessed a societal shift in the attitudes and expectations of employees towards their employers to tackle workplace discrimination and support colleague wellbeing. Leeds City Council also experienced this at the height of the Black Lives Matters movement where our Race Equality Staff Network (formerly the BAME Staff Network) held the organisation to account over its race equality action plan. Within Adults and Health and Children and Families directorates, work begun in assessing the Council's Workplace Race Equality Standard (WRES) which brought to light the lived experiences of ethnically diverse colleagues. Additionally, the former director of Adults & Health (Cath Roff) identified that the formal grievance process for resolving employee disagreements was not working well for everyone. Many formal grievances could and should have been dealt with in a more informal, restorative and relational manner with compassion, empathy and early resolution being the focus. Through a review of the Council's HR grievance practices, data indicated that ethnically diverse staff were disproportionately represented (Grievance Practice Review, September 2022).
- 5 In response to this, the organisation developed a workforce EDI action plan which has five workforce priorities (referenced in the broader EDI Scrutiny Paper):



- 6 As part of the actions under the speaking up and zero tolerance priority, the organisation had agreed to appoint a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian to help the organisation hear, understand, reflect and act upon the lived experience of all colleagues across the organisation. Senior leaders demonstrated a desire for the organisation to become one of learning and psychological

safety, however there is a recognition that this is a massive shift in culture for such a large organisation with such a wide range of different services and more than 2000 managers.

- 7 Freedom to Speak Up as a concept has three key principles:
- **‘Speak Up’** – The act of colleagues speaking up to raise concerns or suggestions and mechanisms available in an organisation to enable colleagues to do this.
 - **‘Listen Up’** – The Guardian and the Organisation listening to what colleagues have said using an approach that strongly demonstrates psychological safety, impartiality, empathy and compassion.
 - **‘Follow Up’** – The organisation’s ability to fulfil its responsibility of acknowledging and responding to concerns / suggestions raised by colleagues. Principally, this includes holding itself to account for ensuring that positive change is made (where needed).
- 8 Whilst these principles should govern the organisation’s approach to Freedom to Speak Up, they also provide for three clear strands of process. As such, the report will be structured around these three key principles.

Speak Up

- 9 The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian received their first contact from a colleague in August 2022. The data below details the number of contacts (how many times the Guardian has been approached by colleagues) from August 2022 up until 31st January 2025.

Number of contacts across the whole organisation							
August 2022 – December 2022	January 2023- December 2023	2024 Q1	2024 Q2	2024 Q3	2024 Q4	January 2025	Total contacts (as of 31/01/2025)
55	115	24	19	20	21	12	266

Leeds City Council employs approximately 14,000 colleagues. In respect to the overall colleague population, the numbers of colleagues approaching the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian may appear relatively small. However, it is important to note that there is real value in listening to what people are saying and using this to influence positive organisational change. The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is one route that colleagues have available to them to raise concerns or suggestions about the workplace. As such, regular triangulation of thematic data occurs with key partners across the organisation to provide a holistic overview of organisational culture and EDI improvement issues. Much of what is heard via the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is often reflected in the triangulation of other sources, however where this is not the case, the Guardian invites senior leaders to be cautiously curious in listening to and resolving colleagues’ concerns.

- 10 A contact to the Guardian does not always result in a colleague’s voice being raised to the organisation. This is because colleagues can sometimes choose to withdraw from using the Freedom to Speak Up process and some may disengage. The reasons for this are varied. Currently between 60-70% of all contacts made to the Guardian resulted in colleagues’ voices being raised to the organisation. This is with exception of Q4 (2024) where 53% of all contacts made to the Guardian resulted in colleague’s voices being raised to the organisation.

What are colleagues speaking up about?

- 11 Colleagues are invited to speak up about:
- Whether or not they feel they or others are being treated fairly
 - Whether they feel that the services the Council provides to its customers may be falling short
 - Where they feel that the Council values are not being followed

- 12 To aid the organisation's understanding and analysis of thematic speaking up data, each contact made / concern raised is placed in a predetermined category and subcategory which is informed by guidance from the National Guardian's Office as well as our Council values and behaviours. There are also EDI specific sub-categories which align with protected characteristics backgrounds. In light of the new legislation being brought forwards in relation to the prevention of workplace sexual harassment (Worker Protection (amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023), two new categories ('sexual harassment' and 'sexual harm') have been created to reflect where concerns of this nature have been shared with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.
- 13 Colleagues feeling as though they or someone else are not being treated fairly by the organisation continues to be the most common theme of concerns raised via the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. During the period: January 2024 to December 2024, 42% of all contacts to the Guardian were in relation to colleagues feeling as though they or someone else was not being treated fairly by the organisation. Although this theme covers a wide range of concerns, it is important to reflect that 'treating people fairly' is one of the Council's values and as such it is concerning that the majority of colleagues who have contacted the Guardian, from their lived experience and perspective feel as though the organisation has not lived up to one of its values in some form. This sub-category also has the highest translation rate for voices being raised to the organisation following contact with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. The second most prevalent theme was 'risk to worker wellbeing.' That is, colleagues who contacted the Guardian about this theme felt that their experience of the workplace placed their (mental) wellbeing at risk.
- 14 Shining a spotlight on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; since August 2022, 21% of all contacts made to the Guardian were from colleagues wishing to discuss concerns relating to their experiences of discrimination against a protected characteristic. This includes 27 contacts (10% of all contacts) relating to experiences of racism at work. In relation to the theme of colleague experiences of racism in the workplace, the proportion of concerns that then go on to be raised to the organisation is lower in comparison to other types of concerns (55%).
- 15 Since August 2022, 7% of all contacts to the Guardian were from colleagues who wished to share their experiences of being discriminated at work due to their disability or long-term health condition. 66% of contacts of this nature then went on to be raised with the organisation, with a number of additional voices being heard and raised from the Disability and Wellbeing Staff Network (DAWN).
- 16 The majority of such concerns raised by disabled colleagues or those with long term health conditions, were predominately regarding support and or access to reasonable adjustments in the workplace or inconsistencies in inclusive recruitment practices. In response to this, the organisation (HR) has now begun some work to address concerns raised about any inconsistencies in the approach to applying reasonable adjustments in the workplace and inclusive recruitment practices (as referenced in the broader EDI scrutiny report).
- 17 A recurrent theme for the organisation relates to women's (uniformed) workwear and the inconsistency in its availability across the organisation. Whilst the Guardian has only received two contacts in relation to this theme, it does relate to some of the issues that the Council's Woman's Voice Staff Network have repeatedly raised with the organisation over previous years. The colleagues cited that the organisation was unable to provide woman-specific workwear due to the cost disparity when compared with men's workwear. The women reported that it not only impacts their comfort at work, but also their sense of value and belonging within the organisation. They also shared that other services in the Council are able to provide women's workwear and did not fully understand the reasoning for such inconsistency.

18 It should be noted that not all contacts relating to concerns about discrimination translated into concerns being raised to the organisation through Freedom to Speak Up. In fact, the translation rate of voices being raised to the organisation in relation to colleagues' lived experiences of discrimination in the workplace appears to be lower than in comparison to other types of concerns. As such, the organisation may wish to further explore this trend to identify and remove (in so far as possible) any barriers to colleagues speaking up about their experiences of workplace discrimination.

Listen up

19 In raising colleagues' voices, the organisation is required to provide a response either directly to the colleague sharing their lived experience of the workplace or indirectly via the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. In general, the organisation responses are appropriate and timely with 87% concerns raised receiving responses. The organisation has autonomy over the nature of their response and often adjusts this accordingly, sensitively and appropriately to the nature of the concern raised. Some of the concerns raised by colleagues can be complex, as a result, there is a recognition that these may take longer for the organisation to respond to. The Chief Executive has recently asked that directors aim to improve response rates to be in the mid-90%. Whilst recognising the importance of listening and responding, there is an awareness that workload pressure (as evidenced in the most recent staff survey) will cause some delays to the organisation responding to Freedom to Speak Up concerns. Nevertheless, the Chief Executive and CLT have reassured the Guardian that the organisation's commitment to Freedom to Speak Up is clear and the expectation that leaders and managers will respond to concerns is steadfast.

Use of Restorative Approaches to Support Early Resolution

20 Feedback from colleagues who have spoken up, suggests that where senior leaders and managers have taken the time to meet with colleagues to further discuss their concerns, they have felt happier and more satisfied with their speaking up journey. Even where colleagues did not achieve the outcome they desired, they still voiced that they valued and appreciated the opportunity to discuss their concerns with a senior leader or manager. This shows that wherever possible there is real value in implementing an early interpersonal and restorative approach to colleagues who speak up rather than a transactional e-mail exchange. There are pockets of really good practices in leaders and managers using restorative and interpersonal approaches to the early resolution of staff concerns raised via Freedom to Speak up, however this approach remains inconsistent across the organisation.

21 The concept of Freedom to Speak Up emphasises that colleagues speaking up should be 'business as usual'. Not only should speaking up be expected, speaking up should be welcomed and actively encouraged. Speaking up can occur in many forms via numerous avenues (line manager, trade union, staff networks, staff surveys etc.) so it is important that managers are supported and skilled in recognising when colleagues speak up and know how to respond in a manner that is appropriate and effective. To support managers with understanding the concept of Freedom to Speak Up and building a speaking up culture within their teams and services, the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has developed a dedicated training session: "Let's talk Speaking Up" which is available to all managers. The sessions launched in October 2024 and are scheduled to run quarterly. Initial feedback from colleagues who have attended the session has been positive.

Effective organisational listening and EDI issues

22 The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has received some contacts from colleagues who have already raised their concerns via a HR formal process (Grievance). These colleagues are speaking up about the length of time it is taking the organisation to resolve their grievance; or the approach and methodology behind the grievance resolution. These are colleagues who

have, in essence 'spoken up' through the formal process. As such, the role of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is limited. However, due to their dissatisfaction with the formal process, colleagues continue to be motivated to approach the Guardian to share their lived experiences of working for Leeds City Council. From reviewing the data in this area, experience of racial or disability discrimination is a consistent feature of the colleague's formal grievance. Some of these colleagues have also reported a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, sometimes resulting in absence. This lived experience is also echoed by voices heard through the staff networks (in particular the Race Equality and DAWN staff networks). Much of this feedback is also reflected in HR's Grievance Practice Review (September 2022) therefore, it is positive that the Corporate Leadership Team and the HR Leadership Team have committed to progressing the implementation of the review's recommendations as a priority for this year. The Corporate Leadership Team have shared that listening to colleagues' voices through the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian remains important, including the need to improve organisational learning from speaking up concerns and formal grievances.

- 23 As part of the purpose of their role the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is invited to 'speak truth power' when they identify instances or discrimination within the organisation. The Guardian is also invited to seek objective assurances that where warranted concerns have been subjected to fair and appropriate investigation by the organisation. In most cases, this support and challenge has been received well by the organisation, however, it does not always result in positive change for the individual raising the concerns and there is more to do to ensure an open and learning approach that does not invalidate, dismiss (without objective merit) or ignore what colleagues describe as their lived experience.
- 24 In the majority of cases, sharing colleagues' lived experiences of the organisation through Freedom to Speak Up has been met with openness and acceptance; whereby leaders and managers have been appropriately motivated to listen and make positive changes where needed. However, there have been a small minority of cases where leaders and managers have found it challenging to listen with compassion and empathy. Failing to listen to and really hear colleagues who speak up is counterproductive to embedding a culture of psychological safety and learning in an organisation. It is important that the organisation ensures that approaches and responses to listening up across the workforce are helpful not harmful. Living the organisation's values of "treating people fairly" & "being open honest and trusted" along with its behavioural expectation that everyone is given "a voice" and the organisation "listens to what they say" should provide the ideal, solid foundation on which Freedom to Speak Up is placed.

Follow Up

- 25 There is evidence that colleague feedback received via the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian has a positive impact on the organisation's strategic approach to building and supporting an inclusive workplace culture. For example, in relation to supporting colleagues with a long-term health condition or disability HR undertook some development work in helping the organisation to understand its responsibilities under the Equalities Act 2010. This learning is now being shared across the organisation through dedicated training sessions under the 'Be Your Best' manager development programme, which is an important part of delivering the ambition of consistency.
- 26 There are also pockets of good practice across the organisation where individual services have responded to concerns raised via multiple staff voice and influence channels (including Freedom to Speak Up) and worked collaboratively to develop practical solutions to improve colleagues' lived experiences in relation to EDI issues.
- 27 In response to concerns raised in relation to colleague's experiences of racism within Children's Residential Services, the service set up a dedicated anti-racism task and finish group which helped to identify key staff issues through listening events and develop a robust and multi-

faceted plan of response. This includes, focussed staff training and awareness, positive engagement and learning for children and young people as well as supporting staff wellbeing.

28 When navigating speaking up concerns, chief officers, heads of service and middle managers play an important role in listening up and following up. This experience has been mostly positive with many chief officers, heads service and managers taking up the opportunity for coaching and support from the Guardian in navigating speaking up concerns (particularly where they relate to EDI issues). The organisation is extremely grateful to the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian for navigating this broad range of sensitive situations in a constructive, even handed and supportive manner.

Sharing and triangulating EDI thematic data

29 The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is managed by Caroline Baria (director for Adults & Health) and has an integral link to all members of CLT. The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian regularly shares thematic data (including EDI specific thematic data) with CLT and the HR Leadership Team. Feedback from CLT and HR has been positive citing that it has helped them to gain a richer, more holistic understanding of lived experiences within their directorates. This dialogue is planned to continue, along with periodic sessions with broader groups of managers and leaders.

30 The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian shares every speaking up concern summary with the Chief Executive of Leeds City Council (Ed Whiting). Whilst it would not be appropriate for the Chief Executive to directly intervene in every single case, the sharing of lived experiences with the Chief Executive is important for helping to provide diversity of strategic thinking. The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian meets with the Chief Executive on a bi-monthly basis to discuss thematic speaking up data and progress on positive change across the organisation.

Conclusions

31 Having established the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role, it is positive to see colleagues using that route to share their lived experience and in many cases receive a response and resolution to their concerns at the earliest opportunity. The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian recognises that listening to colleagues' lived experiences and concerns through this designated route can be hard for senior leaders and managers to hear. However, it is crucial that we listen and learn from those experiences and improve where possible.

32 It should be recognised that the Council is experiencing a time of unprecedented challenge in relation to staff workloads, financial climates and a changing national context. The capacity challenges facing local government will undoubtedly make consistent positive change around organisational culture difficult to achieve. However, through the continued commitment to embedding a positive speaking up culture and improving colleague lived experience and wellbeing – organisational culture change is possible – with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian playing a key strategic role in that and being a part of holding the organisation to account for progress. There is a clear commitment from the council in spite of the pressures, with the ever developing Be Your Best Management Development programme, but it needs to be noted that this change will not happen overnight. It is also important to recognise that the benefits of any work undertaken to improve organisational culture, and the lived experience of colleagues will extend beyond the workforce itself; it will have a positive impact on quality of services provided to customers and be impacted by wider societal factors. Further developments are needed to truly enable Freedom to Speak to successfully support the organisation's EDI agenda and improve the lived experiences of all colleagues. This will take time to embed, and it remains

important that the Council's commitment remains steadfast and the work around embedding a positive speaking up culture is not lost to the current challenging landscape.

What impact will this proposal have?

33 This report provides scrutiny board members with detailed information on the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role, its ambitions and work to date. This will provide more information for scrutiny members to consider the activity and work priorities of the FTSUG and raise comments and questions as appropriate.

How does this proposal impact the three pillars of the Best City Ambition?

Health and Wellbeing

Inclusive Growth

Zero Carbon

34 The FTSUG contributes to the creation of a positive workplace environment and culture that supports and enables staff to be their best. Through this approach, with well-being at its centre, the priorities of the Best City Ambition could be delivered more effectively.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

Wards affected:

Have ward members been consulted?

Yes

No

35 This is an update report to the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board, there has been no specific consultation. The Board considers its work programme at each public meeting and through that process is able to influence its future work programme.

What are the resource implications?

36 There are no specific resource implications associated with this report.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

37 There are no specific risk implications associated with this report.

What are the legal implications?

38 There are no specific legal implications associated with this report.

Options, timescales and measuring success

What other options were considered?

39 As an information and update report to scrutiny this section is not applicable.

How will success be measured?

40 N/A

What is the timetable and who will be responsible for implementation?

41 N/A

Appendices

- None

Background papers

- None