

Item 15.2.1



Whistleblowing Standards

Annual Report

2025/26

Safety, Quality and Risk Team

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NHS Orkney Whistleblowing Standards

Annual Report 2025/26

1. Introduction

NHS Orkney recognises the importance of ensuring that staff and those delivering NHS services feel safe and supported to raise concerns in the public interest. Effective whistleblowing arrangements are a core part of the organisation's wider approach to patient safety, quality, staff wellbeing and organisational learning.

In line with the National Whistleblowing Standards, NHS Orkney monitors whistleblowing activity and reports performance against the national indicators. This includes concerns raised by NHS Orkney staff and information received from independent contractors who deliver NHS services on behalf of the Board. These arrangements are embedded as business as usual and form part of routine governance and assurance processes.

This annual report brings together whistleblowing activity and performance across the 2025/26 financial year, providing an overview of engagement, learning and assurance in relation to whistleblowing. It reflects NHS Orkney's ongoing commitment to openness, listening and continuous improvement.

2. Background

The National Whistleblowing Standards, established by the Independent National Whistleblowing Officer (INWO), provide a consistent framework for how NHS organisations in Scotland must support individuals to raise concerns and how those concerns should be received, assessed and managed. The Standards are designed to promote openness, protect individuals from detriment and ensure that concerns are addressed fairly, proportionately and with a focus on learning and improvement.

The Standards apply to all individuals involved in delivering NHS services, including directly employed staff, students, volunteers, agency workers, contractors, Third Sector organisations and those working within Health and Social Care Partnerships. NHS Boards are responsible for ensuring that these groups are aware of the Standards, understand how to raise concerns and know what support is available.

Within NHS Orkney, whistleblowing arrangements are embedded within the organisation's wider safety, quality and governance structures. Leadership at all levels plays an important role in creating the conditions for speaking up, supported by clear routes, confidential contacts and executive oversight.

3. Speaking Up

NHS Orkney provides a range of ways for staff and those delivering NHS services to raise concerns or seek advice. These include the formal whistleblowing process, an anonymous reporting form, Confidential Contacts, and the option to speak directly with senior leaders such as the Chief Executive, the Whistleblowing Champion or the Executive Lead for Whistleblowing. These routes are intended to support early advice seeking, proportionate handling of issues and confidence that concerns will be listened to.

Across the 2025/26 reporting year, a small number of matters were raised through speaking up routes. These included concerns raised anonymously, and issues discussed with senior leaders or Confidential Contacts. Where concerns did not meet the definition of whistleblowing under the National Whistleblowing Standards, they were reviewed promptly and directed to the most suitable organisational process, such as workforce, service management or support routes, with the aim of resolving issues early and effectively.

Examples from the quarterly reports include:

- An anonymous concern relating to service delivery and waiting times, which was acknowledged and used to inform wider service discussion and improvement activity within the relevant specialty.
- Anonymous and identifiable concerns relating to individual behaviour or workplace issues, which were addressed and resolved through normal line management and workforce processes.
- Requests for advice and support where individuals were seeking reassurance or guidance, rather than raising a formal whistleblowing concern.

During some quarters, no concerns were raised directly with the Chief Executive or the Executive Lead for Whistleblowing. In others, senior leaders were approached for advice or signposting rather than to initiate a formal whistleblowing process. This pattern reflects the use of multiple speaking up routes and supports early resolution and learning.

Overall, activity across the year demonstrates that speaking up routes are being used flexibly and proportionately. NHS Orkney continues to focus on ensuring that staff understand the available options, feel supported to seek advice, and are confident that concerns will be taken seriously and handled fairly.

4. Confidential Contacts

Confidential Contacts are a well established part of NHS Orkney's speaking up arrangements and provide a safe, informal route for individuals to seek advice, discuss concerns or explore options before deciding whether to raise a matter

formally. Confidential Contacts do not investigate concerns but offer support, signposting and reassurance.

Throughout the 2025/26 reporting year, Confidential Contacts received a small number of contacts. These varied in nature and included:

- Requests for advice relating to workplace or departmental issues, which were resolved locally through management routes.
- Concerns relating to organisational culture or governance processes, which were escalated for further consideration.
- Situations where individuals sought reassurance or guidance rather than raising a formal whistleblowing concern.

None of the contacts received during the year progressed to formal whistleblowing concerns under the National Whistleblowing Standards. This reflects the role of Confidential Contacts in supporting early conversations and helping individuals access the most suitable route for their issue.

A quarterly “touchpoint” meeting is held involving the Confidential Contacts, the Whistleblowing Champion, the Executive Lead for Whistleblowing and the Head of Patient Safety, Quality and Risk. These meetings provide an opportunity to:

- Share themes and learning, even where no formal concerns have been raised.
- Reflect on organisational culture and morale.
- Identify opportunities to promote speaking up and early advice seeking.
- Consider the visibility, accessibility and resilience of Confidential Contact arrangements.

During the year, these discussions included consideration of staff morale during periods of organisational change, and exploration of ways to strengthen the Confidential Contact role. This has included work to expand and diversify the pool of Confidential Contacts, including exploring alignment with existing Peer Support arrangements, to ensure that support remains accessible and trusted across the organisation.

In quarters where no contacts were received, this was considered alongside wider engagement and speaking up activity, rather than viewed in isolation. This approach recognises that assurance comes from understanding how concerns would be handled if raised, not solely from the volume of activity.

5. Outcomes and Performance Against the Whistleblowing Indicators

The National Whistleblowing Standards outline a series of key performance indicators (KPIs) against which each NHS Board is required to report. These indicators are designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement in the handling of whistleblowing concerns.

This report presents NHS Orkney’s performance against these indicators and includes separate reporting for NHS Orkney and its independent contractors. The independent contractors are only required to report against KPI’s four – nine. While the indicators are not presented in numerical order, they have been arranged to enhance clarity and readability. For ease of reference, the corresponding indicator number is included alongside each heading.

The indicators are as follows:

1. Learning from concerns raised
2. Experience for those raising concerns
3. Staff awareness and training
4. The total number of concerns received
5. Concerns closed at each stage in the process
6. Concerns upheld, partially upheld and not upheld
7. Average times
8. Number of concerns closed at each stage with the set timescales
9. Number of cases where extension was authorised

Staff Awareness and Training (indicator 3)

Count of Learning Status				2025/26			
Course Title	Completed all time	In Progress all time	Total	Completed Q1	Completed Q2	Completed Q3	Completed Q4
Whistleblowing: an overview	111	0	111	0	2	2	2
Whistleblowing: for managers & people who receive concerns	7	0	7	0	0	0	0
Whistleblowing: for senior managers	24	0	24	0	0	0	0

Whistleblowing e-learning is available to all staff through Turas and is promoted through topic specific pages and regular internal communications. While completion is not mandatory, it is highlighted for managers when they join the organisation and as part of ongoing development.

Uptake during 2025/26 remained low. This reflects the absence of active whistleblowing cases rather than a lack of organisational capability. NHS Orkney is exploring additional ways to support understanding and confidence around speaking up that are practical, meaningful and accessible, including planned inclusion within the Managers’ Development Programme.

Concerns and Management of Concerns (indicators 4-9)

NHS Orkney

Indicator	Performance 2025/26			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
The total number of concerns raised	0	0	0	0
Concerns closed at each stage of the process	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Concerns upheld, partially upheld, and not upheld	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Average times (working days)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of concerns closed at each stage within the set timescales	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of cases where extension was authorised	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

No whistleblowing concerns were raised by NHS Orkney staff during the 2025/26 reporting year.

Independent Contractors

Indicator	Performance 2025/65			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
The total number of concerns raised	0	0	0	0
Concerns closed at each stage of the process	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Concerns upheld, partially upheld, and not upheld	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Average times (working days)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of concerns closed at each stage within the set timescales	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of cases where extension was authorised	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

No whistleblowing concerns were reported by independent contractors during the reporting year. Engagement with contractors is now embedded within routine quarterly processes, supporting consistent expectations and alignment with national standards.

Learning From Concerns Raised (indicator 1)

No whistleblowing concerns were raised during the 2025/26 reporting year. Engagement activity throughout the year focused on embedding updated guidance, strengthening awareness and supporting a culture where speaking up is encouraged and valued.

Learning from previously escalated concerns concluded in the prior year has been fully embedded, with actions completed and improvements sustained.

Experience For Those Raising Concerns (indicator 2)

As no whistleblowing concerns were raised during the reporting year, no direct feedback from whistleblowers was sought. NHS Orkney continues to consider how feedback can be gathered in future to inform improvement and strengthen the experience for individuals who speak up.

6. Action plans and Progress on Upheld Concerns

There were no whistleblowing concerns or outstanding action plans during the 2025/26 reporting year. All actions arising from previously escalated concerns were completed and closed following review and resolution.

7. Executive Assurance Summary

This annual report provides assurance that NHS Orkney's whistleblowing arrangements remain in place, operational and proportionate to the level of activity during the 2025/26 financial year. Throughout the year, no whistleblowing concerns were raised by NHS Orkney staff or independent contractors, and there were no upheld cases, action plans or outstanding matters requiring escalation under the National Whistleblowing Standards.

While the absence of formal whistleblowing concerns is noted, NHS Orkney recognises that assurance is not derived solely from activity levels. Instead, assurance is drawn from the effectiveness of the systems, relationships and behaviours in place to support speaking up, should concerns arise. Across the year, staff and contractors continued to access a range of speaking-up routes, including anonymous reporting, Confidential Contacts and senior leadership, with matters addressed promptly and proportionately through different organisational processes.

Effective working relationships between the Executive Lead for Whistleblowing, the Whistleblowing Champion, Confidential Contacts and the Head of Patient Safety, Quality and Risk have supported consistent decision making, early advice seeking and clarity around the routes for managing concerns. These arrangements help to reduce unnecessary escalation while ensuring that issues relating to safety, quality,

governance or integrity would be recognised and managed effectively in a timely manner.

Engagement with independent contractors delivering NHS services has continued throughout the year and is now embedded within routine quarterly reporting. This supports consistent expectations across organisational boundaries and strengthens system wide confidence in whistleblowing arrangements.

During 2025/26, NHS Orkney has also focused on strengthening awareness, accessibility and understanding of whistleblowing. This has included active promotion of guidance, reflective discussion through Confidential Contact meetings, and consideration of how training and learning can be supported in ways that are practical and meaningful. Planned inclusion of whistleblowing within the forthcoming Managers' Development Programme provides an opportunity to further reinforce roles, responsibilities and confidence in handling concerns.

Looking ahead, NHS Orkney will continue to focus on maintaining awareness of whistleblowing routes, strengthening relationships across the system and enhancing support mechanisms for those who speak up. Work to expand and diversify the pool of Confidential Contacts remains ongoing, alongside a review of whistleblowing guidance to improve clarity and address areas where further explanation has been requested through consultation.

Overall, the position at the end of the 2025/26 reporting year provides assurance that whistleblowing governance within NHS Orkney is functioning as intended, aligned with national standards and supported by effective leadership, collaborative working and a continued commitment to openness, learning, patient safety and staff wellbeing.