



Health and wellbeing guardians on the board:

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



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About this resource

This guidance is for NHS boards and health and wellbeing guardians in large healthcare organisations, such as integrated care boards (ICBs), provider organisations and large primary care organisations (for example, federations). It outlines how all board members play a role in supporting the health and wellbeing guardian to create a culture of wellbeing and should be read in conjunction with the national [health and wellbeing guardian guidance: guidance for implementing health and wellbeing guardians across different healthcare settings](#) created by NHS England and further supported by the [resources](#) created by NHS Employers.



Introduction

Having a health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian will help ensure the function 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 Long Term Workforce Plan](#) aims to improve the experience of working in the NHS for everyone. This is supported by the [NHS Growing occupational health and wellbeing together strategy](#) aims to improve the health and wellbeing services for our NHS people, to keep them safe and healthy, and empowered to pass good care onto our patients. 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.

Creating a culture of wellbeing is not the responsibility of the health and wellbeing guardian. 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 health and wellbeing guardian and what do they do?

The NHS People Plan outlines that all healthcare organisations should have a health and wellbeing guardian. Within the context of a large NHS organisation, the health and wellbeing guardian is best suited to a non-executive director (NED) or an equivalent role. This will help to enable the independent challenge to the senior leadership team and can hold them to account for their corporate responsibility to improve the health and wellbeing of their employees and ensure that organisational decisions do not have a negative impact on employee health and wellbeing.

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 officer (CEO), 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.

A health and wellbeing guardian's function 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 seek assurance that equality, diversity and inclusion is considered with respect to health and wellbeing decisions, where different people need different support at different times. They ensure that all voices are represented and heard across the organisation and within the board.

The health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian are realistic given the amount of time they are in the organisation/ working on the function .

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 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 health and wellbeing guardian networks to maximise the opportunity for system wide partnerships and cross-organisational learning.

It is important to note that the health and wellbeing guardian role is a strategic function 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 function 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 health and wellbeing guardian is operationally supported to discharge these assurance duties by appropriate operational leaders within the organisation, likely to include the HR director, HR organisational development team and occupational health and wellbeing team. Some health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian connected to the wellbeing needs of employees, in these instances, it is important that the health and wellbeing guardian is not an operational support role.

Creating a network of [health and wellbeing champions](#) can act as the eyes and ears of the health and wellbeing guardian, whilst also acting as the day-to-day wellbeing support for colleagues within their teams and work areas. Health and wellbeing 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.

Health and 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 function within the organisation. The health and 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
- NHS Employers
- NHS Integrated Care Systems
- NHS health and wellbeing guardian networks
- NHS health and wellbeing leads
- NHS staff networks
- NHS England regional leads
- HRD networks



Chair



Chief Executive



HR Director



Finance Director



Medical Director



Nursing Director



Non-Executive Directors

How board members can support the health and wellbeing guardian

The health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian to create a culture of wellbeing.

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

- the senior leadership team taking collaborative and decisive action to improve the health and wellbeing of the workforce
- 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 health and 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

The chair, working with the CEO will enable the organisation to appoint a health and wellbeing guardian who is competent and confident in their ability to challenge the board. It is vital that the health and wellbeing guardian champions equality, diversity, and inclusion of the workforce, through the lens of health and wellbeing.

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

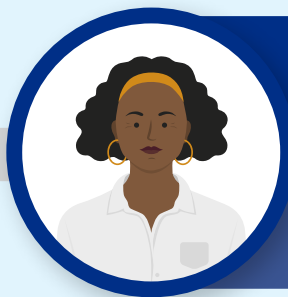
Giving the health and wellbeing guardian space on the agenda to ask questions, seek assurance and challenge how board leads are ensuring the wellbeing of their people remains a priority and allows them to gain insights into the health and wellbeing of the organisation.

Empower your health and wellbeing guardian to hold the board to account. Support the health and wellbeing guardian by holding the board to take decisive action to improve the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

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 health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian function is as effective as possible.





Chief Executive

Working with the chair to recruit a health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian will help ensure the function is fully embedded in your organisation and is as effective as possible.

Appointing a health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian has a voice at every board meeting.

Building a relationship with your health and wellbeing guardian is important to enable them to receive, review and to make recommendations on all activities which impact on the health and wellbeing of our people. 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.

A health and 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 health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian will not personally collect, analyse, or present this data on wellbeing to your board, this is purely so the health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian which may allow the health and wellbeing guardian to seek assurance from the whole board on how your organisation enables and supports the wellbeing of its employees. The CEO has a vital role in collectively holding the senior leadership team to account, to enable decisive action to be taken to improve the health and wellbeing of the workforce, and to demonstrate the impact of this.



HR Director or Chief People Officer

The HR director (HRD)/ Chief People Office (CPO) should collaborate and work closely in partnership with the health and wellbeing guardian to assess the organisation's health and wellbeing initiatives.

They should ensure wellbeing is placed at the centre of people strategies to create a culture for employees to thrive. The health and wellbeing guardian can be a critical friend in developing and assuring your people that the 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 health and wellbeing guardian role is an assurance role, not necessarily a wellbeing expert. The HRD/CPO is key in helping the health and wellbeing guardian analyse your organisation's data on wellbeing, understanding 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/CPO and health and wellbeing guardian should work collaboratively to allow the wellbeing guardian to challenge and question the support needs and opportunities offered to staff. They will be able to check in with staff to see the impact these opportunities are having on their overall motivation, skills and wellbeing. They work in partnership at board to champion all health and wellbeing opportunities.

The HRD/CPO can provide the health and wellbeing guardian assurance that the organisation is supporting the national wellbeing strategy and policy, ensuring the basic needs of wellbeing of staff are met, such as staff having the means to [rest, rehydrate and refuel](#) or ensuring people are having meaningful and regular [health and wellbeing conversations](#). The health and wellbeing guardian can have the potential to be a supportive voice, strengthening the ability of the HRD/CPO to raise positive challenge on the transformation required for the future of wellbeing at work in the organisation. The HRD/CPO is able to utilise existing resources to achieve this, such as the [NHS Health and wellbeing framework toolkit](#) and demonstrating achievement against the national [NHS Growing occupational health and wellbeing together strategy](#).

Sharing information on national strategies, initiatives and policies including the NHS People Plan offers the health and wellbeing guardian a chance to assess staff wellbeing impacts.

The HRD/CPO, can the health and wellbeing guardian navigate opportunities to understand the wellbeing of the workforce while respecting their limited time. Encouraging attendance at wellbeing events such as workshops, coffee mornings and drop-in sessions can provide valuable insights.

Additionally, providing clear data on the impact of successful wellbeing initiatives can help guide the direct future efforts and resources in health and wellbeing.



Finance Director

The finance director and their team can support the health and wellbeing guardian and HRD/CPO to create the return on investment (RoI), productivity and economic argument for investing in the health and wellbeing of the workforce. Working together, they will demonstrate how the evidence links improved employee health and wellbeing, to improved productivity, and therefore the capacity to deliver higher quality patient care

Similarly, the health and 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 health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian.



Medical Director

There is great scope and value for the medical director to connect, work with and support the health and wellbeing guardian, using their clinical expertise to champion this, where employees are essentially the ‘patient’ through the lens of health and wellbeing. 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 to 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 health and wellbeing 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 health and wellbeing guardian that this is being done continually.



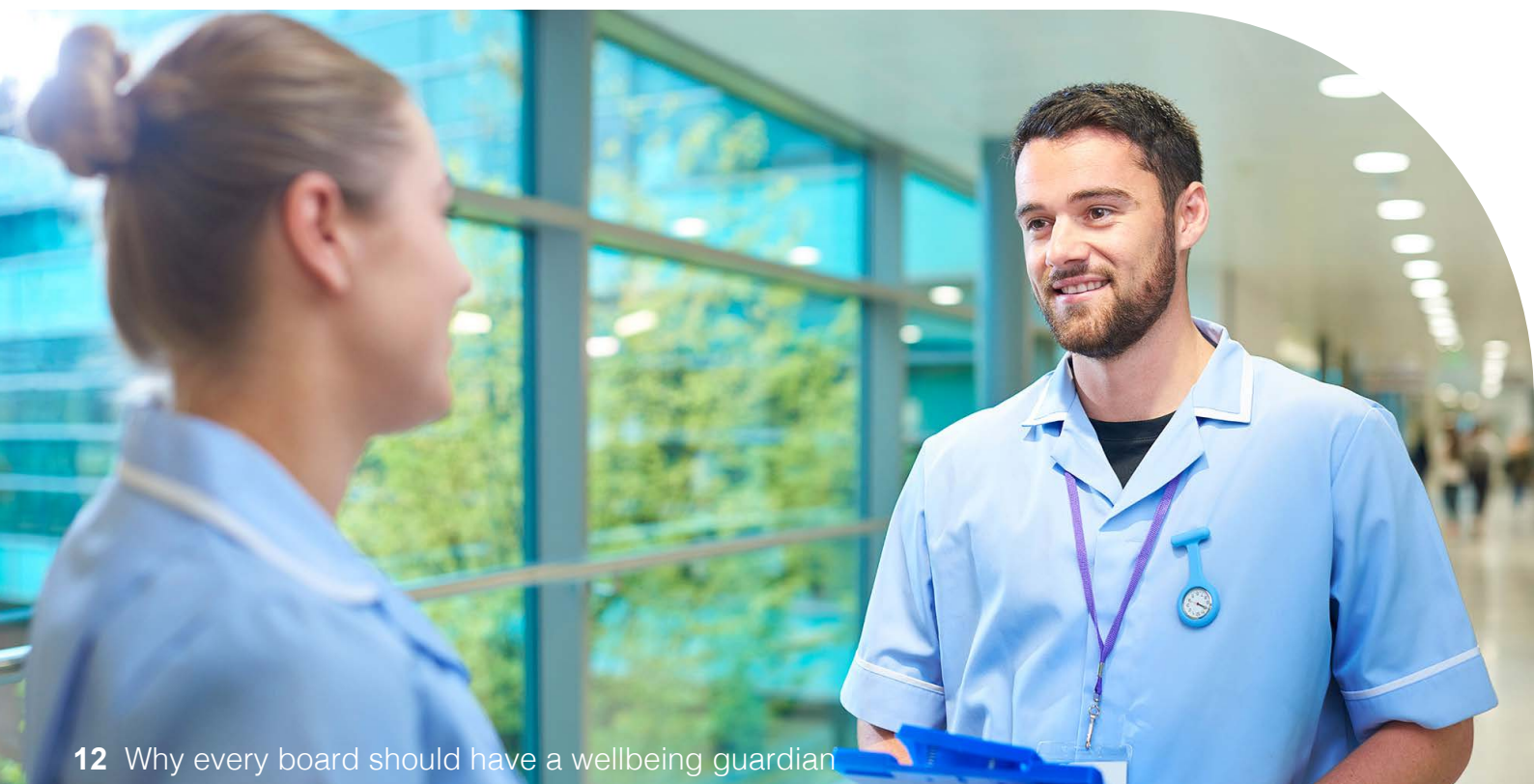


Nursing Director

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 health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian, allowing them to work together to increase the overall health and wellbeing of nursing staff, using their clinical expertise to champion this, where employees are essentially the 'patient' through the lens of health and wellbeing.

The nursing director and health and wellbeing guardian can work together to ensure strategic wellbeing initiatives are fully operationalised, such as [rest, rehydrate and refuel](#), 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 health and 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 health and 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 health and 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 health and wellbeing guardian allows NEDs to give a balanced perspective.



Freedom to speak up guardian

Whilst the health and wellbeing guardian and the freedom to speak up (FTSU) guardian have similar titles, their functions and roles within the organisation have a different focus . However, it is essential that both the FTSU and health and wellbeing guardian work collaboratively, in the interest of keeping staff safe and healthy

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 health and 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 health and 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 health and 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 can share the themes relating to the health, wellbeing, and safety issues of its people with the health and 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 health and 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 Englands Freedom to Speak Up: Guidance for NHS trust and NHS foundation trust boards resources.

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For more information, get in touch with the NHSEI team:

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Full national health and wellbeing support offer can be found in:

[Supporting our NHS people.](#)

