

Designed for:

All staff, including permanent, bank, agency, students and volunteers, who may want to raise a concern or understand how Freedom to Speak Up works.

Purpose:

To explain the difference between thematic concerns and individual concerns; to show how FTSU supports staff with both; and to support staff with understanding what happens when a concern is raised, including when themes are escalated and when concerns need to be taken forward through the appropriate formal organisational processes.

Freedom to Speak Up Guidance: thematic and individual concerns

Freedom to Speak Up supports those working in the NHS to raise concerns safely and confidently when they feel unable to do so through normal routes.

You can speak up about anything that affects:

- patient safety/quality of care
- worker safety
- staff wellbeing
- culture and behaviour
- systems, processes or ways of working

FTSU will support you to ensure it is directed to the right place. Sometimes concerns show wider themes across a team or service. Other times, concerns relate to a specific situation and need a formal process. Both types of concern are valid.

What is a FTSU thematic concern?

A thematic concern is a concern that shows a pattern, trend, or wider issue in a team, service, or workplace culture. It is not about one person or one event.

The purpose of a thematic concern escalation is to help senior leaders understand what might be happening across a service, so that improvements can be made.

A concern is thematic when it:

- affects more than one person (or could do so)
- relates to how a team or service is working overall
- involves culture, behaviour, processes, systems or ways of working
- highlights a broader risk to staff or patient safety/quality of care
- can be shared in a way that protects the identity of the person who spoke up

FTSU is not restricted to themes only.

You can raise any concern with FTSU, including concerns about a specific event or situation. FTSU will guide you on about the best route for your concern. If your concern needs a formal investigation or a People & Culture/governance process, the organisation will decide this and take it forward. FTSU does not run or oversee investigations but will continue to support you. FTSU can also escalate any themes arising from your concern.

Examples of FTSU thematic concerns

These examples show the kinds of patterns or wider concerns that FTSU can escalate:

<p>Workforce and staffing themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty maintaining safe skill mix • Heavy reliance on temporary staff affecting continuity • Ongoing unsafe staffing levels • Regular or repeated lone working in high-risk areas 	<p>Workplace culture and behaviour themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff feeling unable or unsafe to speak up • Inconsistent treatment of staff across a team • Blame culture, low morale, or lack of psychological safety • Concerns about fairness or respect in a team • Repeated breakdowns in team communication (for example: important updates not shared consistently; unclear expectations; mixed messages; staff feeling uninformed or not listened to)
<p>Wellbeing and morale themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team wide stress, fatigue or burnout • Staff feeling unsupported with workload • Ongoing challenges balancing work and personal responsibilities <p>Lack of breaks, debriefs or emotional support</p>	<p>Process and system themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent rota or scheduling issues affecting several staff • Issues with systems, documentation or tools • Operational processes that regularly cause delays or confusion • Repeated administrative errors • Inconsistent application of flexible working processes
<p>Patient safety and quality of care themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated equipment or environmental safety risks • Documentation or care-plan quality concerns • Inconsistent compliance with clinical or safety standards • Repeated patient or carer feedback indicating similar issues • Regular missed observations or delayed responses • Poor handover practices 	

What is an individual concern?

A individual, case specific concern is about an individual's experience or a single event.

These concerns usually need a formal response through line management, People & Culture or Clinical Governance.

FTSU can support and guide you but does not investigate case specific concerns.

A concern is case specific when it:

- relates to an individual's own treatment or experience
- concerns pay, sickness, conduct, grievance or capability
- involves a specific clinical incident
- requires formal fact finding, evidence or investigation

Examples of individual concerns

- A concern about how you were spoken to in a meeting
- A disagreement about sickness management or attendance
- An incorrect payslip or missing hours
- One person's flexible working request being declined
- A personal allegation of discrimination, bullying or harassment
- A clinical incident involving a particular member of staff
- A dispute about a performance or capability process

These must be handled through:

- Line management
- People & Culture
- The Resolution Policy
- Clinical incident reporting
- Union advice and support

FTSU cannot replace these processes.

How FTSU decides whether to escalate thematically

FTSU looks at the nature of the concern, not just the content.

FTSU will escalate thematically when:

- the concern reflects a wider pattern or issue
- your confidentiality can be protected
- leaders need to be aware of themes emerging across a team or service
- the concern relates to staff experience, culture, processes, or safety

Some FTSU concerns can be resolved informally, and some are better managed through formal organisational processes rather than thematic escalation. In these cases, FTSU will support you and make sure the concern reaches the right route.

However, if a formal process has begun and a staff member feels the process is delayed, not progressing, or not being handled appropriately, FTSU can escalate concerns about how the process itself is being managed. FTSU will support you and ensure your concern, whether thematic or case-specific, is directed to the most appropriate route.

Summary

FTSU thematic concerns = Patterns → culture → learning → improvement

FTSU individual concerns = Individual details → depending on nature of concern, could be resolved informally → if a formal process is required → investigation → outcome