

Whistleblowing Annual Report – 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026

INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth annual report outlining concerns raised under the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's (BHSCT) *Your Right to Raise a Concern (Whistleblowing) Policy* during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

The Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 provides legal protection for workers who raise concerns about wrongdoing, malpractice, risk, fraud, patient safety issues or other matters that are in the public interest. The Trust is committed to ensuring that all staff feel safe, supported and empowered to speak up when they have concerns, confident that those concerns will be listened to, taken seriously and addressed appropriately.

The Trust's Whistleblowing Policy is based on the Health and Social Care (HSC) Model Policy and aligns with guidance issued by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). The policy aims to promote a culture of openness, transparency and accountability, recognising that staff who raise concerns make an important contribution to maintaining high standards of patient care, staff wellbeing and organisational governance.

This report provides an overview of whistleblowing activity during 2025/26, including the number and nature of concerns raised, progress made in implementing improvements arising from internal audit recommendations, training and awareness initiatives, developments within the Whistleblowing Service, and arrangements for identifying and sharing organisational learning. It also highlights the Trust's ongoing commitment to strengthening its speaking-up culture and ensuring that concerns raised in the public interest lead to meaningful improvement and learning across the organisation.

INTERNAL AUDIT

Progress Achieved

The majority of recommendations arising from the 2024 Internal Audit, from which the Trust received a 'satisfactory' rating, have been fully completed, with the few outstanding recommendations due to be completed by the end of August 2026.

An outstanding recommendation relates to the introduction of Key Performance Indicators. These have recently been agreed and are in line with those in place in other HSC organisations. It is our intention to report on KPI compliance in future annual reports. Having adopted the same KPI's as other organisations will enable benchmarking to be undertaken.

A follow up whistleblowing audit is scheduled to take place during August/September 2026.

Training

Investigator Training

The 'Managing Workplace Investigations Training' package, which was developed and rolled out in response to an internal audit recommendation, has now been delivered to 160 Trust managers across the organisation. This intensive one-day course, which covers all aspects of conducting investigations and report writing, aims to equip managers tasked with undertaking both whistleblowing and employee relations type investigations with the knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

Advocate Training

Training for whistleblowing advocates has been held during the year to ensure their knowledge and practice is kept up to date.

The Trust Whistleblowing Advocates register has also been updated. Eleven staff members, Band 8a and above, have agreed to act as advocates throughout the organisation. Their names and contact details are available via the Loop intranet page. Further staff from the Band 4-7 cohort have been sought to act as advocates, which it is hoped will help to further encourage more staff to speak up.

Staff Training

Online whistleblowing training is available to all staff on the 'LearnHSCNI' platform. A total of 1,728 staff completed this training within the 2025/26 reporting period. The overall total of staff who have completed the training since it went live in June 2023 is 4,373.

1728 staff completed whistleblowing training 25/26

160 managers in total have been trained in managing investigations

RAISING CONCERNS WHISTLEBLOWING DATA

In total, **seventy** concerns were raised during the period 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026. This represents a **98%** increase on the previous year, when 36 concerns were received (see Figure 1 below). Additionally, it is notable that a number of concerns raised were multifaceted and complex in nature, comprising more than one issue. Such concerns invariably require greater resource to consider and address appropriately. Regardless of how many issues are raised within a whistleblow, all will be recorded, for reporting purposes, as one 'case' under a single whistleblowing reference number.

The increase in whistleblowing concerns may be partially attributed to the DCO Partners Review of Cardiac Surgery Report and the subsequent actions taken. Moreover, the number of concerns received following staff having engaged with the Hill/McBride review, was significant, as Figure 1 below illustrates. As at 31 March 2026, **eighty-eight** concerns remained open in total, which includes cases carried over from previous years.

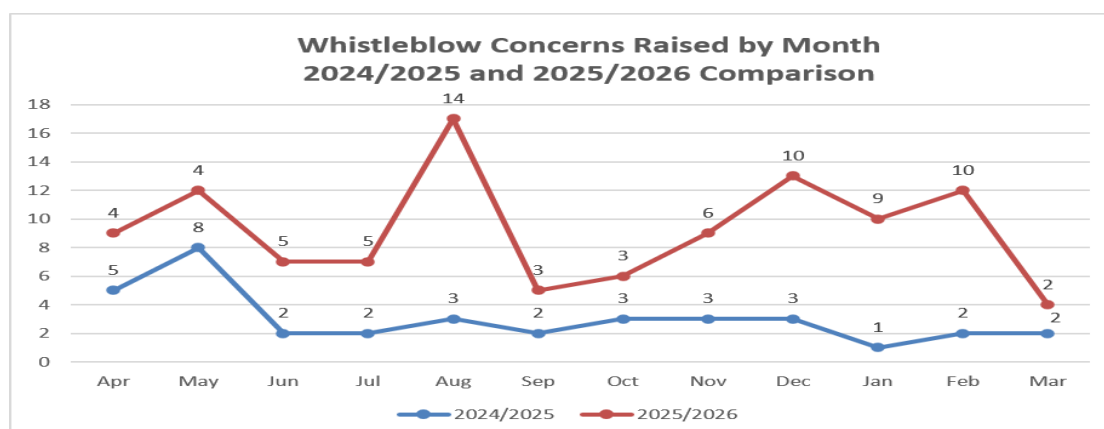


Figure 1

While the increase in the number of concerns received has implications for the resources required to manage and respond to cases appropriately, it can also be viewed positively as

an indicator that staff are increasingly aware of the mechanisms available to them and feel more confident in raising concerns through this channel.

The team has continued to promote awareness of how to raise a concern throughout the year. Three questions within the Trust's annual staff survey measure whether staff know how to challenge and raise a concern, whether they feel able to do so without fear of negative consequences, and whether they are confident that the organisation will take appropriate action when concerns are raised.

As shown in Figure 2 below, there has been a year-on-year increase across all three measures over the past four-year period. This is a positive indication that staff awareness, confidence, and trust in the processes for raising concerns continue to improve.

Survey Year	I know how to challenge and raise concerns about a work issue if I need to	I am able to raise concerns in this team without fear of negative consequences	I am confident that the organisation acts on concerns that are raised
2023	75.3	61.1	55.7
2024	75.6	63.7	55.8
2025	77.2	66.2	58.2
2026	78.2	66.5	58.8

Figure 2

The types of concerns raised during 2025/26 were consistent with those reported in the previous year, as shown in Figure 3 below. Breach of legal obligation (for example, patient safety concerns) remained the most frequently reported category. The second highest category was criminal offences (for example, fraud), followed by health and safety concerns.

There continues to be a high number of cases referred to the Whistleblowing Service that are subsequently transferred to alternative services, as they do not meet the criteria for whistleblowing. Of the seventy concerns raised in the period, seven concerns were redirected to Human Resources (HR), eleven to Fraud and one to Information Governance, as appropriate to those services.

To address this, further communication and education regarding the various routes available for raising concerns are planned, with the aim of ensuring that concerns are directed to the most appropriate service at the outset.

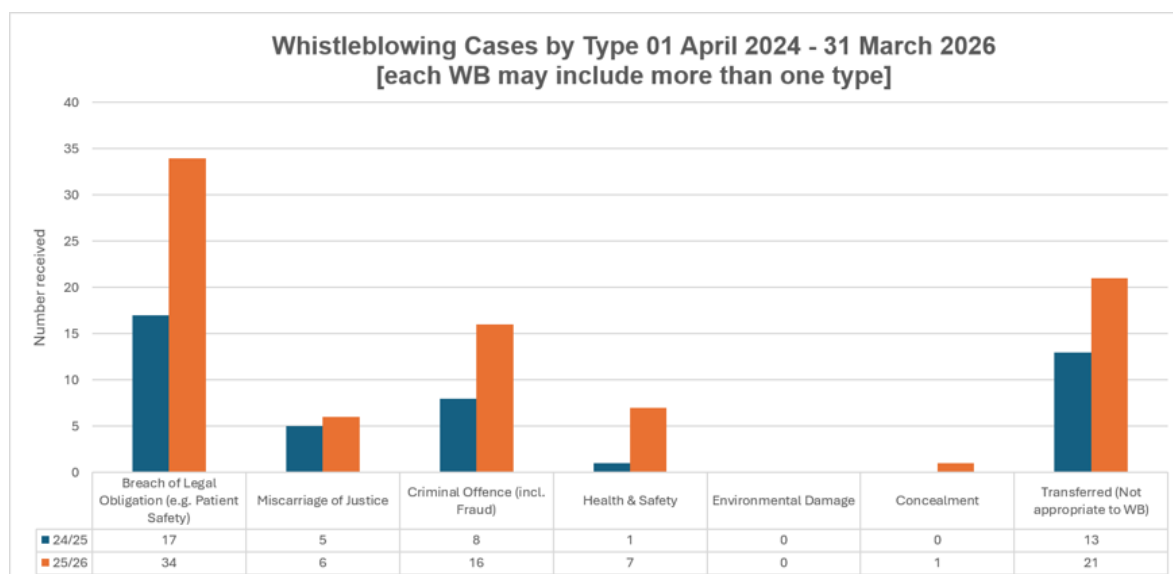


Figure 3

Reporting

During the reporting year, whistleblowing has been included in the quarterly HR People Report. Comparison with the other HSC organisations has been conducted, during the second half of the reporting period, to inform that reporting, and Figure 4 below illustrates how the number of concerns received per head of staff is higher in BHSCT.

	BHSCT	Org A	Org B	Org C	Org D	Org E	Org F
31.12.25	0.28%	0.06%	0.09%	0.03%	0.13%	0.05%	0.06%
31.03.26	0.39%	0.09%	0.11%	0.05%	0.13%	0.08%	0.06%

Figure 4

Staffing

Due to the increasing number of whistleblowing cases received, funding was secured for an additional Band 7 and Band 4 post. This increase in funding has been welcomed by the service to improve the capacity of the whistleblowing function.

To date, the Band 7 post has been appointed and recruitment is currently ongoing for the Band 4 post. Initially, funding was secured on a temporary basis, which resulted in the service being unable to attract a suitable applicant despite multiple attempts. As funding has now been secured to recruit on a permanent basis, the service is confident that it will be able to appoint.

The additional Band 7 appointment has enabled the team to make significant progress in reducing the backlog of cases; however, further work is required to fully address the outstanding caseload. It is anticipated that the appointment of the additional Band 4 post will further enhance the capacity of the service and support continued progress in reducing the backlog during 2026/27. This additional resource will help ensure that concerns are managed and responded to in a timely and effective manner.

LEARNING

The identification and sharing of learning across the organisation is important for the Trust in terms of both improving services and reducing risk. It is within the remit of the Raising Concerns (Whistleblowing) Oversight & Shared Learning Group, which is chaired by Ellen Finlay, Non-Executive Director, to identify learning from whistleblowing investigations and ensure this is shared as appropriate.

Directors are now required to complete a director sign-off template, once an action plan addressing any recommendations arising from a whistleblowing investigation has been agreed. The Director will record any learning identified within this template, which will then be brought to the Raising Concerns (Whistleblowing) Oversight & Shared Learning Group by the Senior Manager for Whistleblowing. This learning will be disseminated as appropriate across the organisation. A summary of this learning will be included in future annual reports to provide a high-level overview.

The Senior Manager for Whistleblowing also attends the weekly Governance Teleconference, with the aim of identifying similar concerns and issues being dealt with across the organisation. This supports the triangulation of information received by the Trust in order to identify learning as appropriate.

CONCLUSION

During 2025/26, the Trust continued to demonstrate its commitment to fostering an open and supportive culture in which staff feel safe and empowered to raise concerns. This has been a significant year for the Whistleblowing Service, with seventy concerns received, representing a substantial 98% increase on the previous year. While this increase has created additional demands on service capacity, it can also be viewed as evidence of growing awareness of the whistleblowing process and increased confidence among staff in using the mechanisms available to them.

The Trust has made good progress in implementing recommendations arising from the 2024 Internal Audit, including the introduction of investigator training, the continued development of the whistleblowing advocate network, and the establishment of key performance indicators to support future benchmarking and performance monitoring. Investment in additional staffing has further strengthened the service and has enabled progress to be made in reducing the backlog of cases.

Staff engagement and awareness continue to improve, with annual staff survey results showing positive upward trends in staff knowledge of how to raise concerns, confidence in doing so without fear of detriment, and trust that concerns will be acted upon appropriately. These findings suggest that the Trust's ongoing communication, training and awareness-raising activities are having a positive impact. Work will continue next year to further enhance this position.

The profile of concerns raised during the year remained broadly consistent with previous years, with breaches of legal obligation (e.g. patient safety), criminal offences and health and safety concerns continuing to be the most common categories reported. The continued receipt of concerns that do not meet the whistleblowing criteria highlights the need for ongoing education regarding the range of routes available for raising concerns, ensuring that issues are directed to the most appropriate service.

The Trust remains committed to strengthening its speaking-up culture and ensuring that all staff feel supported to raise concerns in the public interest. The progress demonstrated during 2025/26, including increased staff confidence, improved awareness of reporting mechanisms, enhanced training provision, strengthened governance arrangements and additional investment in the Whistleblowing Service, provides a strong foundation for future development. The Trust recognises the valuable contribution made by staff who raise concerns and remains committed to responding to them in a fair, timely and transparent manner. By continuing to promote openness, learning and accountability, the Trust will further embed a culture where speaking up is encouraged, valued and recognised as an essential component of delivering safe, high-quality care.