



Standards  
for England

# **Public perceptions of ethics**

July 2009

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 Standards for England is a strategic regulator providing an independent national oversight of how local authorities promote and improve the ethical behaviour of members.
- 1.2 We assist local authorities in this work by providing support and guidance, as well as investigating cases which are inappropriate for authorities to deal with themselves. We are a non-departmental public body, set up by an Act of Parliament.
- 1.3 Every two years, Standards for England measures and monitors the public's perceptions of local councillors' ethical standards and their confidence in the redress mechanisms for dealing with shortcomings in individuals' behaviour. The findings presented in this report relate to measures of perceptions taken in June 2009. Comparisons are made with data collected in 2005 and 2007.
- 1.4 It is worth noting, when comparing findings across the time periods, that data for this survey was collected in 2009 and following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007). This Act resulted in local government being given greater responsibility for its own local standards arrangements including the initial receipt and assessment of allegations.
- 1.5 As this report shows, there are many factors which impact upon public perceptions, and of these, many are outside of the control of local government. Therefore, this project alone will not identify the causality of any changes in public perceptions i.e. we will not be able to directly attribute any changes in public perceptions directly to changes in the standards framework.
- 1.6 The research reported on here is part of a programme of research to assess the impact of the standards framework. This programme of research enables us to assess impacts from the perspective of members, officers and the public on public trust, member behaviour and confidence in accountability mechanisms, as well as changes in culture, values and systems and processes in local government.

## 2 Research objectives

- 2.1 The purpose of this research is to monitor, and identify any changes over time, in:
- a) levels of public trust in member behaviour and integrity
  - b) levels of public confidence in the accountability mechanisms for dealing with instances where member behaviour has not met the required standard
  - c) public expectations of the behaviour of members.

## 3 Methodology

- 3.1 In 2005 baseline measurements of public perceptions of ethics in local government were taken. In 2007 and 2009 the survey was repeated in order to track any changes over time. The survey will continue to be repeated every two years.
- 3.2 This paper provides a summary of the main 2009 findings. A total of 1,735 (weighted) adults aged 18+ were interviewed face-to-face in home using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) by Gfk NOP Research. Interviews took place between 11 and 16 June 2009. Comparisons are made with 2007 and 2009.

## 4 Public perceptions

- 4.1 It should be noted that perception data carries health warnings. Ipsos MORI (Duffy, 2009) identify five key areas in particular which should be noted when interpreting perceptions data. Firstly, is that perceptions are just that and people can be wrong. Secondly, is the media influence on public opinion and their role in the agenda setting of current issues. Thirdly, is that there is a relationship between peoples' political values and the way they rate services. Fourthly, our expectations as service users are rising as we see ourselves as consumers of public services. Finally, the way in which people view their local area has been found to be an indicator of satisfaction with services.
- 4.2 Other factors which have been found to influence public perceptions of services, and therefore their favourability towards and trust in councils, are experiences of council services, levels of council tax, individuals' loyalty toward an organisation, the political party in control at that council and the extent to which individuals identify with their local area (Cowell *et al*, 2009).
- 4.3 Therefore, while it is important to measure and monitor public perceptions there are a variety of factors, many of which are outside of the control of local government and local politicians, which influence public perceptions.
- 4.4 That said, any work which seeks to assess the impacts of the standards framework in local government must include an assessment of public perceptions. It is, after all, the public that we want to have trust in politicians and confidence in accountability mechanisms. Public disengagement with

politics has already begun<sup>\*</sup>. Some characteristics of disengagement are falling voter turn out, falling civic engagement and falling party memberships<sup>†</sup>. While the actual cause of this disengagement is not clear, it is not hard to imagine how public perceptions of members' standards of behaviour might influence public desire to engage in local democracy.

## 5 Executive summary

### Findings

- 5.1 It was to be expected that the MPs' expenses scandal would have an impact on public perceptions of MPs and it was also considered likely that this might impact on perceptions of local councillors. This research provides evidence to suggest, however, that while there has been a negative impact on public perceptions of councillors, there has been a more marked affect on perceptions of MPs and government ministers.
- 5.2 The perception that local MPs, government ministers and politicians generally tell the truth either 'always' or 'most of the time' has fallen since 2007 (-5%, -3% and -3% respectively). Similarly, over the same period, perceptions that these groups 'rarely' or 'never' tell the truth have increased significantly (+9%, +9% and +10% respectively). The extent to which it is perceived that local councillors tell the truth 'always' or 'most of the time' has not changed significantly since 2007 (30% in 2007 and 28% in 2009).
- 5.3 That said, local councillors' behaviour is more likely to be rated by the public as 'low' in 2009 and is more likely to be said to have 'got-worse' compared to 2007. However, the proportions of the public saying that local councillors' behaviour is 'high' overall or has 'improved' recently are the same in 2009 as in 2007.
- 5.4 Interestingly, the rise in the proportion of the public who think that the behaviour of local councillors has got worse does not translate into a corresponding rise in the number of the complaints the public say they have made about local councillors. Similar proportions of the general public report ever having made a complaint about a local councillor in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (3%, 4% and 3% respectively).
- 5.5 It is clear that those within local government have, when compared to the public, a far higher level of confidence in the ability of local government to uncover poor behaviour and to deal with it appropriately.
- 5.6 Other research referred to in this paper indicates that the local standards framework has had a positive impact on local government. Not least, there is a view from within local government that the behaviour of members has improved. The proportion of our members and officers that have told us they think that members' standard of behaviour has improved in their authority has increased each time we conducted this survey.

### Conclusions

---

<sup>\*</sup> For example, there has been a fall in general election turnouts since 1992 (Ipsos MORI, Blair's Britain).

<sup>†</sup> Ipsos MORI, Blair's Britain

- 5.7 Field work for this survey was undertaken in June and therefore the timing of this survey suggests that these changes could be a result of the recent revelations about MPs' expenses. The findings show that public attitudes towards local councillors have changed less markedly than for local MPs, politicians generally and government ministers. This suggests that the public are able to discern, to an extent, between local and national politicians. We also know from other research that the public are more favourable about the local context than the national.
- 5.8 Ipsos MORI recently reported that satisfaction with local government is decreasing with fewer than half of residents satisfied with the performance of their authority, the lowest national score recorded in a decade or more (Duffy, 2009). It is possible then that the fall in confidence in local authorities' ability to uncover and deal with breaches is proportionate to and part of this trend of decreasing satisfaction with councils generally.
- 5.9 We also know from other research that a key driver of the general public's satisfaction with services is the amount to which they are kept informed. Informing the general public about the existence of the local standards framework and the role of standards committees may be the key to increased confidence in local authorities' ability to uncover and deal with breaches in standards. There is much work to be done on increasing the public's confidence in the accountability mechanisms of local government.
- 5.10 Finally, although public perceptions are an important part in assessing any impacts of the local standards framework, it cannot be used in isolation to measure impact. Firstly, because there are a variety of factors which influence public perceptions, many of which are outside of the control of local government and local politicians. And secondly because there will be other changes, aside from public perceptions, that have occurred alongside the local standards framework which need to be captured. This research, therefore, is one part of a wider research programme which seeks to assess the impacts of the local standards framework.

## 6 Findings

### Trust

- 6.1 It was to be expected that the MPs' expenses scandal would have an impact on public perceptions of MPs. It was also likely that this might impact on perceptions of local councillors.
- 6.2 The perception that local MPs, Government Ministers and politicians generally tell the truth either 'all' or 'most of the time' has fallen since 2007 (-5%, -3% and -3% respectively). Similarly, over the same period, perceptions that these groups 'rarely' or 'never' tell the truth have increased significantly (+9%, +9% and +10% respectively).
- 6.3 Between 2005 and 2007 there was a decrease of 6% in the proportion of respondents who thought that local councillors tell the truth 'always or most of the time' (36% in 2005, 30% in 2007). However, in 2009 and post the

MPS' expenses scandal, the extent to which the public think local councillors tell the truth remains largely unchanged compared to 2007.

- 6.4 Public attitudes towards local councillors seem to have changed less markedly than for local MPs, politicians generally and government ministers. This suggests the public are able to discern, to an extent, between local and national politicians.

Table 1

Q1 How often do you think the following types of people tell the truth?

	Always/most of the time				Rarely/never			
	2005	2007	2009	% point change 07-09*	2005	2007	2009	% point change 07-09*
Your local MP‡	23%	29%	24%	-5%	30%	20%	29%	+9
Your local councillor/s	36%	30%	28%	-2%	13%	18%	20%	+2
Politicians generally	n/a	17%	14%	-3%	n/a	33%	42%	+9
Government ministers	n/a	18%	15%	-3%	n/a	33%	43%	+10

Base: 2005 All answering ( 1,027 ), 2007 All-answering (1,720), 2009 All-answering (1,735).  
na: not asked in 2005.

\*Significant changes (i.e. changes of greater than 2%) have been highlighted.

- 6.5 Another possible reason comes from a recent Ipsos MORI report\*\* on public perceptions. Their data suggests that public perceptions are more favourable of the local context than of the national context. For example, the proportion of the general public who do not trust MPs in general to tell the truth is 76%, this drops to 44% when asked to consider their own local MP.

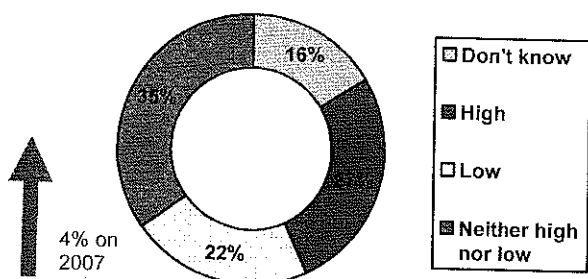
‡ In 2005 the question wording was: Members of Parliament

\*\* Julia Clark, Public reaction to the expenses scandal, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Understanding Society, The Perils of Perception, Summer 2009.

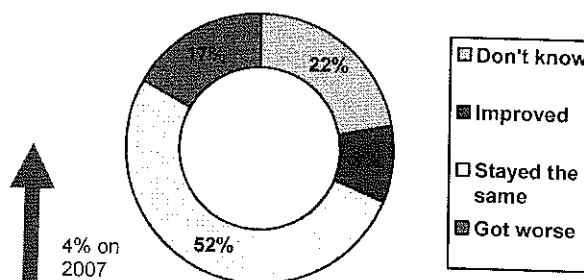
### Rating standards

- 6.6 When asked to rate the behaviour of local councillors, the most frequently expressed perception was that councillor behaviour was neither high nor low (35%). In 2007 the perception was similar with 34% saying neither high nor low in response.
- 6.7 Despite the majority staying neutral, councillor behaviour is also more likely to be rated as low than in 2007. Around three in ten rated behaviour as high (27%). A further two in ten rated behaviour as low (22%), representing a four percentage point increase on 2007 findings.
- 6.8 However, the converse, that behaviour is less likely to be rated as high and less likely to have said to have improved, is not true. The perception that their behaviour has improved (9%) or stayed the same (52%) is the same in 2009 as it was in 2007.
- 6.9 The findings contrast with those from our research with members and officers in local government which indicates that they have a more favourable perception of local councillors than the public do. The proportion of our stakeholders that told us they think that members' standard of behaviour has improved in their authority has increased (from 27% in 2005, to 44% in 2007 to 47% in 2009)<sup>††</sup>.

Q. Overall, how would you rate the standards of behaviour of local councillors in your area?



Q. In the last few years, do you think the standard of behaviour of local councillors in your area has ... ?



### Making a complaint

- 6.10 Interestingly, the rise in the proportion of the public who think that the behaviour of local councillors has got worse does not translate into a corresponding rise in the number of the complaints the public say they have made about local councillors. Similar proportions of the general public report ever having made a complaint about a local councillor in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (3%, 4% and 3% respectively).

<sup>††</sup> Satisfaction with the Standards Board for England and Attitudes to the Ethical Environment – BMG Research 2009.

- 6.11 And of those who have not made a complaint, similar proportions have never wanted to make a complaint about a local councillor in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (89%, 89% and 99% respectively).

### Behaviours exhibited by councillors

- 6.12 The general public were asked the extent to which they think local councillors exhibit certain types of behaviour (See Table 2 below). The behaviours are a 'loose' proxy of the Nolan principles (see Appendix I for an explanation of which Nolan Principles are demonstrated in each behaviour). The three behaviours that the most respondents thought councillors exhibited "always" or "most of the time" were:

- "they treat people with respect" (42%)
- "they work in the interests of the neighbourhood" (34%)
- "they use their power for their own personal gain" (32%).

- 6.13 The public are now more likely to say that only "a few" or "none" of their local councillors undertake the behaviours outlined in the statements below. The largest increases in the numbers of the public saying that only "a few" or "none" of their local councillors undertake the following behaviours can be seen for:

- "they set a good example for others in their private lives" (+9%)
- "they treat everyone equally" (+7%)
- "they tell the truth" (+6).

**Table 2**

Q4 Thinking of all the local councillors in your area, how many councillors, if any, would you say each of the following statements applies to?

	All/Most			A few/None		
	2007	2009	% point change 07-09*	2007	2009	% point change 07-09*
They are in touch with what the general public thinks is important (A)	26	23	-3	40	45	+5
They do what they promised they would do when elected (B)	18	15	-3	49	53	+4
They explain the reasons for their actions and decisions (C)	26	22	-4	38	45	+7
They make sure public money is used wisely (D)	25	21	-4	42	46	+4
They take bribes (E)	8	8	0	51	53	+2
They own up when they make mistakes (F)	13	12	-1	58	62	+4
They set a good example for others in their private lives (G)	25	20	-5	30	39	+9



They tell the truth (H)	29	25	<b>-4</b>	35	41	<b>+6</b>
They treat everyone equally (I)	31	29	<b>-2</b>	33	40	<b>+7</b>
They use their power for their own personal gain (J)	28	32	<b>+4</b>	40	40	<b>0</b>
They treat people with respect (K)	46	42	<b>-4</b>	24	29	<b>+5</b>
They work in the interest of this neighbourhood (L)	39	34	<b>-5</b>	32	29	<b>+3</b>

Base: 2005 All answering ( 1,027 ), 2007 All answering (1,720), 2009 All answering (1,735)

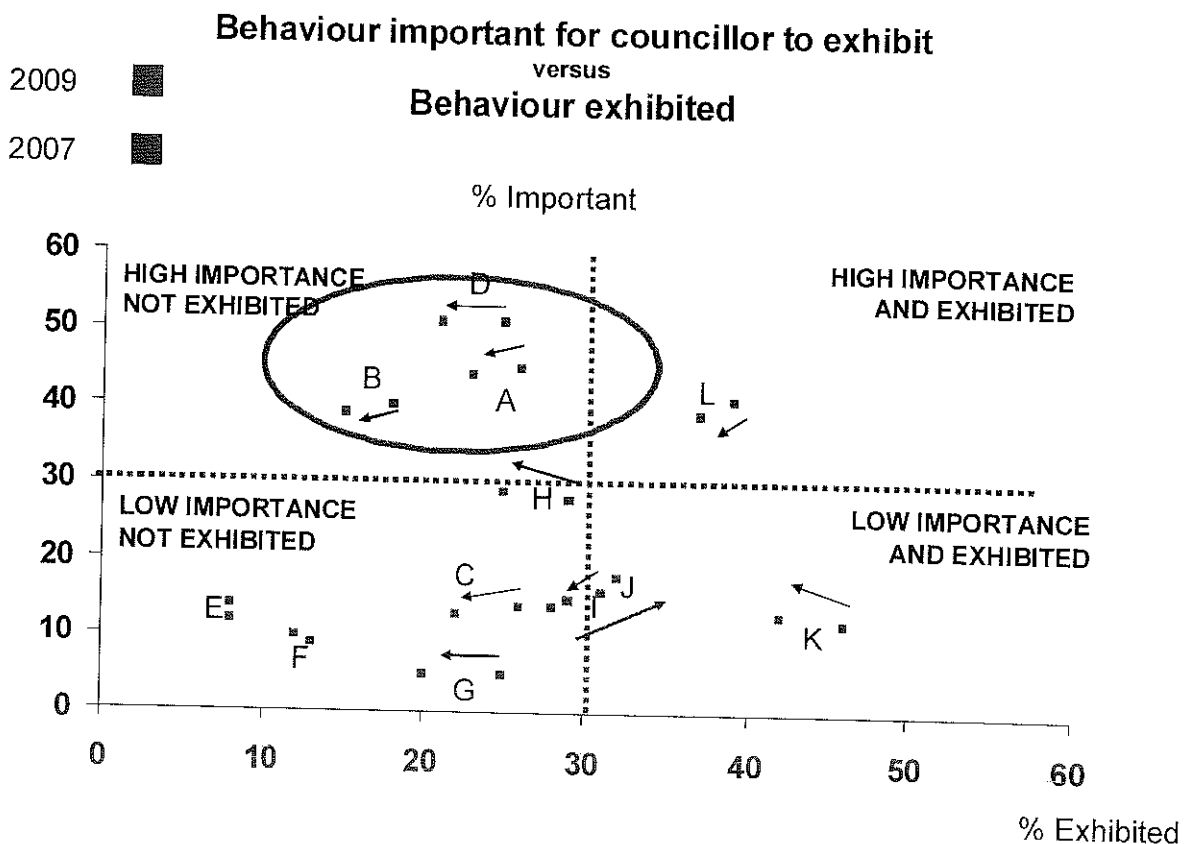
\*Significant changes (i.e. changes of greater than 2%) have been highlighted.

6.14 Respondents were then asked to rate how important they thought these behaviours to be. Findings are the same in 2009 as they were in 2005 and 2007. The top three are:

- “make sure that public money is used wisely”
- “be in touch with what the general public thinks is important”
- “work in the interests of this neighbourhood”.

6.15 The only significant change has been that there has been an increase in the proportion of people who think it is important for local councillors “not to use their power for their own personal gain”. This has increased four percentage points from 14% in 2007 to 18% in 2009 and it could be that this change could have been prompted by the MPs’ expenses scandal.

- 6.16 The chart below plots the behaviours the public think it is important for councillors to display against behaviours they think councillors actually exhibit.



\*It should be noted that quadrants of importance and apply have been plotted at less than 50% on each axis.

- 6.17 Behaviours that appear above the horizontal dotted line can be considered by the public as most important for councillors to exhibit. Behaviours on the right of the dotted line are those that it is considered that members should exhibit. Behaviours below the line are considered less important. Behaviours that appear on the left of the vertical dotted line are those that the public feel councillors are not exhibiting overall.
- 6.18 The chart shows, therefore, that the public feel that the only attribute which it is important for councillors to exhibit and that councillors actually do exhibit, is 'work in the interests of this neighbourhood' (L). This was also the case in 2005 and in 2007.
- 6.19 The attributes highlighted in the top left quadrant represent those that people think are important for councillors to do, but that they do not think councillors are doing, or are doing but to a limited extent. These are:
- do what they promised when elected (B)
  - make sure that public money is used wisely (D)
  - they are in touch with what the general public thinks is important (A).

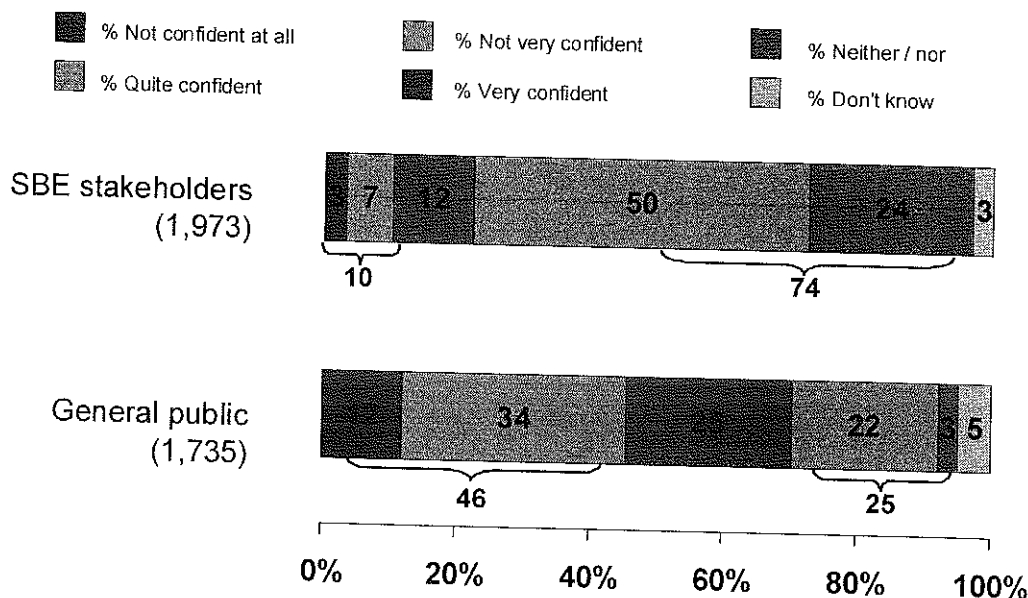
This was also the case in 2005 and 2007.

- 6.20 It would be reasonable to assume then that if councillors want the public to think more positively about them, then changing perceptions of their behaviour in these three areas would be very useful.
- 6.21 The arrows show direction of change between 2007 and 2009. A general trend as demonstrated by the directional arrows is that the perception is that the behaviours are exhibited to a lesser extent than in 2007. The exception is J ("They use their power for their own political gain") which is perceived to be more important by more people and to be exhibited more than it was in 2007.

**Confidence in accountability mechanisms**

- 6.22 Public perceptions of local councillors have for the most part held up against the recent MPs' scandal. Local authorities by contrast seem to have suffered. Levels of confidence in local authorities' ability to uncover standards issues have fallen. This could be explained by a recent finding from Ipsos MORI<sup>##</sup> (2009) that despite an increase in ratings of local quality of life by the public, there has been a significant and simultaneous reduction in satisfaction with the way councils run things.
- 6.23 One quarter of respondents in our public perceptions survey are confident that the local authority would uncover any issues (25%), representing a 4% drop in confidence compared to 2007. The proportion of those who are not confident that breaches in standards would be uncovered has increased from 40% in 2007 to 46% in 2009.

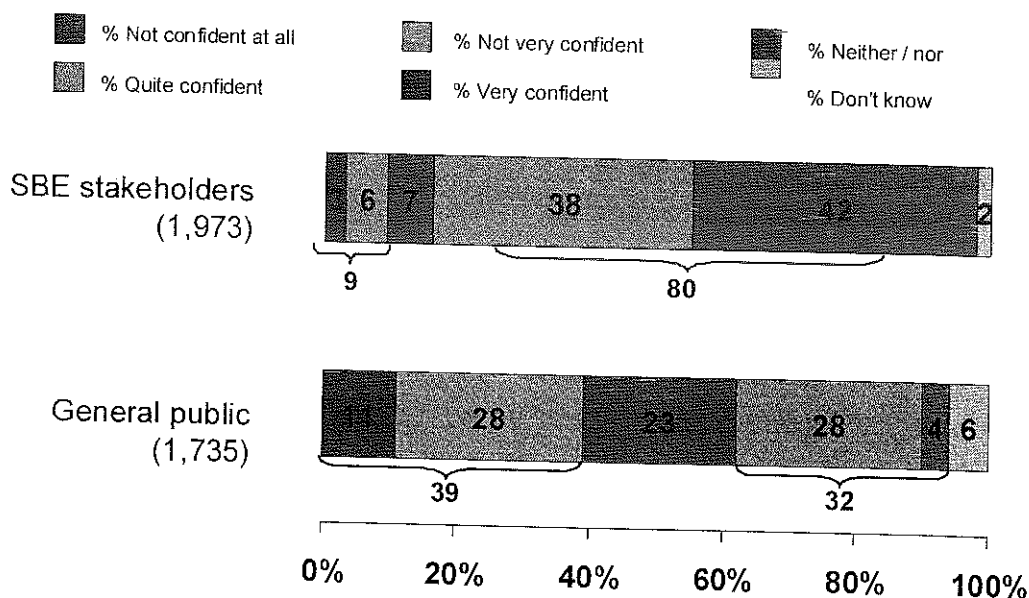
**Q If there was a breach of standards in behaviour by a councillor of your local authority, how confident, or not, are you that the local authority would uncover this?**



<sup>##</sup> Based on analysis of a partial national dataset from the Place Survey which was released by CLG on 23 June 2009.

- 6.24 However, as this chart demonstrates our stakeholders (members and officers) are more than twice as likely to be confident than the public, that their local authority would uncover a breach of standards in behaviour by a local councillor.
- 6.25 Levels of confidence that local authorities will deal appropriately with breaches in the standard of behaviour of a local councillor have also dropped. In 2007 almost four in ten were confident the authority would deal appropriately with such issues (39%), however this has dropped to around one in three in 2009 (32%). Similarly, in 2007 one third were not confident the authority would deal appropriately with such issues (33%), while this has increased to almost four in ten in 2009 (39%).

**Q If a breach of standards of behaviour is uncovered, how confident, or not, are you that the councillor involved would be dealt with appropriately?**



- 6.26 Again, the chart demonstrates that members and officers are more than twice as likely, compared to the public, to think that a councillor would be dealt with appropriately if it was uncovered that their behaviour had fallen short of the expected standard.
- 6.27 According to Ipsos MORI (2009) many of the key drivers impacting on satisfaction levels are not directly concerned with quality of service provision. For example, most variation in satisfaction levels can be explained by factors such as: the proportion of the population with degrees, the deprivation level, the region, the proportion of the population aged under 21 and the proportion of people who under-occupy their homes. Of the factors that are in the control of local authorities, it is suggested that the following have the most impact: satisfaction with an area, crime and liveability factors, how the council actually delivers services and relates to citizens, and information – being informed correlates highly with satisfaction.

6.28 Therefore our finding that people are less confident that local authorities will detect and deal with breaches in standards could be part of wider trend of reducing satisfaction. However, drawing on Ipsos MORI's key driver analysis informing the general public about the existence of the local standards framework and the role of standards committees may be the key to increased confidence in local authorities' ability to deal with breaches in standards.

6.29 Indeed, further evidence from the public perceptions survey suggests that there is room for improvement in the levels of public awareness of these issues. For example, one in five says they know that their local authority has a standards committee (19%). And of those, eight in ten say they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about what it does (79%). Four in ten say they do not know whether they know that their local authority has a standards committee or not (42%) and a further four in ten say no, they don't know that it has a standards committee (39%).

### Public interest in what councillors do

6.30 There was little change in the levels of public interest in what councillors do and how they do their jobs compared to 2007. Respondents were asked to select a statement (See Table 3) that best reflects their interest in councillors and the work that they do. The most common response was "I like to know what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it" (36%), followed by "I'm not interested in what councillors do as long as they do their job" (28%).

6.31 Compared with 2005, in 2007 there was an increase in the proportion of those not interested in their councillors; the increase has been sustained in 2009. It is perhaps surprising that the general public do not want more of an oversight of what councillors do.

**Table 3**

Which one of these statements best represents your feelings about local councillors in your area?

	2005 %	2007 %	2009 %	% point change 07-09*
I'm not interested in what councillors do, or how they do their job	3	6	7	+1
I'm not interested in what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it	22	27	28	+1
I like to know what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it	44	37	36	-1
I would like to have more of a say in what councillors do	23	19	21	+2
I already know about councillors and feel able to get across my views	5	6	5	-1

Base: all answering 2005 (1,027), 2007 (1,720) and 2009 (1,735)

## **7 Further information**

For further information on this paper, please contact **Hannah Pearson** on 0161 817 5417 or email [hannah.pearson@standardsboard.gov.uk](mailto:hannah.pearson@standardsboard.gov.uk).

### **Appendices and attachments**

#### **Appendix I**

- Behaviour attributes and also which of the Seven Principles in Public Life it is intended to represent.

## Appendix I Behaviour attributes and also which of the Seven Principles in Public Life it is intended to represent

In the 2005 MORI survey behaviour attributes were devised as loose proxies for the Seven Principles in Public Life. The general public were asked about their perceptions in relation to these behaviour attributes as it was thought it easier for people to relate to.

The same behaviour attributes were used again in this 2007 survey. The table below shows the behaviour attributes and also which of the Seven Principles in Public Life it is intended to represent.

	Behaviour attribute	Seven Principles in Public Life
A	They treat people with respect	<b>Respect for others</b>
B	They work in the interests of this neighbourhood	<b>Honesty Integrity</b>
C	They treat everyone equally	<b>Objectivity Respect for others</b>
D	They set a good example for others in their private lives	<b>Leadership</b>
E	They tell the truth	<b>Honesty Integrity</b>
F	They are in touch with what the general public thinks is important	<b>Personal judgement Selflessness</b>
G	They do not use their power for their own personal gain	<b>Selflessness</b>
H	They explain the reasons for their actions and decisions	<b>Openness</b>
I	They make sure that public money is used wisely	<b>Stewardship</b>
J	They do what they promised they would do when elected	<b>Honesty Integrity</b>
K	They take bribes	<b>Honesty Integrity Duty to uphold the law</b>
L	They own up when they make mistakes	<b>Accountability</b>

## References

Julia Clark, Public reaction to the expenses scandal, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Understanding Society, The Perils of Perception, Summer 2009.

Bobby Duffy and Debbie Lee Chan, People, Perceptions and Place, Ipsos MORI Local, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, June 2009.

Stakeholder Tracker Survey (2009) Satisfaction levels with the Standards Board for England and Attitudes to the Ethical Environment, research conducted by BMG Research on behalf of Standards for England.

Duffy, 2009, Perils of perception, Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, Understanding Society, The Perils of Perception, summer 2009.

Richard Cowell, James Downe and Karen Morgan, Assessing the Impact and Effectiveness of the Ethical Framework in Local Government in England, Cardiff University, 2009.