

Public Perceptions of Ethics

July 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Standards Board for England is responsible for promoting high ethical standards and investigating allegations that members' behaviour may have fallen short of the required standards.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill will give local government greater responsibility for ensuring high standards of conduct, including the assessment of allegations in the first instance and undertaking a greater proportion of investigations than previously. The Standards Board for England will become a light touch, strategic regulator. The Bill draws on the Tenth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 'Getting the balance right; implementing standards of conduct in public life.'

The Standards Board has devised a programme of research to assess the impact of the new standards framework on the ethical governance of an authority. This will involve assessing any changes to the systems, processes, procedures and the culture and values of authorities. In addition the research will assess impacts on the behaviour of members and the confidence and trust of the public.

The findings presented in this report are the first part of that research programme to be completed. This particular project will track public perceptions of ethics in local government during the build up, implementation and operation of the changes to the local standards framework. Comparisons are made with historic data collected in 2005. Subsequent data collection points are 2009 and 2011.

It should be noted that this project alone will not identify the causality of any changes i.e. we will not be able to directly attribute any changes in public perceptions directly to changes in the ethical framework. However, in combination, the various research projects will provide a more complete picture than in isolation.

Research objectives

The purpose of this research is to measure any changes in public confidence in local democracy. In particular the research will focus on identifying any changes in:

- public trust in the integrity of members and local authorities;
- public perceptions on the openness and transparency of decision-making in an authority; and
- public expectations and perceptions of members.

Methodology

In 2005 baseline measurements of public perceptions of ethics in local government were taken. In 2007, key questions from the survey were repeated in order to track any changes over time. Measures will also be taken in July 2009 and 2011.

This paper provides a summary of the main 2007 findings. A total of 1,751 (1,720 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 12th and 17th July 2007.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- 1) The public think MPs and local councillors tell the truth more than politicians generally or government ministers. However, compared to 2005, the public are now less likely to think local councillors tell the truth.
- 2) Almost three in ten rate the standard of behaviour of their local councillors as high (28%), while less than two in ten say low (18%). One-third of respondents say the standard is neither high nor low (34%) and a further two in ten say they 'don't know' (20%). Both these findings suggest a low awareness of and contact with local councillors.
- 3) Just over one in ten say standards have improved (11%) and around one in seven say they have got worse (13%). 54% say the standard of behaviour of local councillors in their local area has not changed over the last few years.
- 4) Four in ten people do like to know what councillors are doing, without getting involved (37%). However, the second most common response was that people are not interested in what councillors are doing and are also happy to let them get on with it (27%).
- 5) The top three behaviours chosen as most important for councillors to do are: make sure that public money is used wisely (51%), be in touch with what the general public thinks is important (45%) and work for the interests of this neighbourhood (41%).
- 6) Only four per cent of people say they have ever made a complaint against a councillor.
- 7) When asked (unprompted) who they would contact to make a complaint about a councillor most people said the council or the council complaints department (43%).

CONCLUSIONS

- 1) The emerging picture from our research with members and officers that standards are improving is not translating into changes in public perceptions.
- 2) Findings from other research we have undertaken has shown that the proportion of officers and members who told us they think that members' standard of behaviour has improved in their authority has increased (27% in 2004 to 44% in 2007)¹. This is in contrast to the findings here that the extent to which people think local councillors tell the truth has fallen since 2005 (which is mainly attributable to an increase in 'don't know' responses).
- 3) Overall there has been little change overall in public perceptions of ethics since 2005.

¹ Satisfaction with the Standards Board for England and Attitudes to the Ethical Environment – BMG Research 2006.

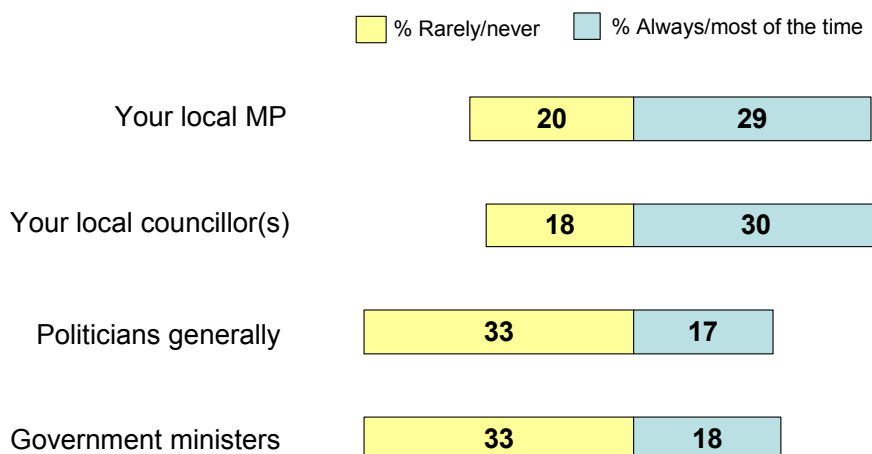
- 4) One implication of this finding is that although public perceptions are an important part in assessing any impacts of the ethical framework, it cannot be used in isolation to measure impact. Indeed, our wider research programme has been designed to reflect this and the findings presented here will also be used alongside those from the other projects to give a fuller picture.
- 5) Findings also suggest low awareness of and contact with local councillors. Examples of low awareness include the large proportion of 'don't know' responses when asked whether councillors tell the truth, when asked to rate the behaviour of local councillors and when asked how the behaviour of local councillors has changed. This may go some way in explaining the public perception – despite the indicators that councillor behaviour is improving.
- 6) Most people said they would contact the council (general or complaints department) if they wanted to complain about a councillor. This could be considered evidence in support of the local filter as the council is the most mentioned organisation for respondents to contact with a complaint against a councillor. However, this research has identified low levels of confidence in local authorities' ability to identify breaches of standards. Over time we will be able to determine whether or not this changes.
- 7) This also supports the Standards Board's activities in supporting and encouraging standards committees to be proactive in promoting to the public what standards of behaviour councillors are encouraged to adhere to and what the authority is doing to ensure that this happens.

FINDINGS

Trust

The public think MPs and local councillors tell the truth more than politicians generally or government ministers.

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



Base: All respondents (1,720)

Respondents of social grade ABC1 are more likely to say that their local councillor tells the truth 'always' or 'most of the time' (33%) than C2DEs (26%). This is also the case for those in the middle and top age bands (32% and 31% respectively), compared to younger people (25%).

Young people were more likely to say they 'don't know' whether local councillors tell the truth or not (19%) than older age groups (13% of 35-54 year olds and of those aged 55+). BME respondents were also more likely to say 'don't know' (29%) compared to White respondents (19%).

As shown in the table below, compared to 2005, the public are now less likely to think local councillors tell the truth. However, this is due mainly to an increase in the proportion who 'don't know' whether local councillors tell the truth or not, rather than an increase in those who felt that local councillors only 'sometimes' or 'rarely' tell the truth.

Table 1.1

How often people think local councillors and MPs tell the truth

	% 2005	% 2007	% change
Local councillors			
Always / most of the time	36	30	-6
Sometimes / rarely	53	51	-2
Don't know	8	15	+7
MPs			
Always / most of the time	23	29	+6
Sometimes / rarely	68	50	-18
Don't know	5	14	+9

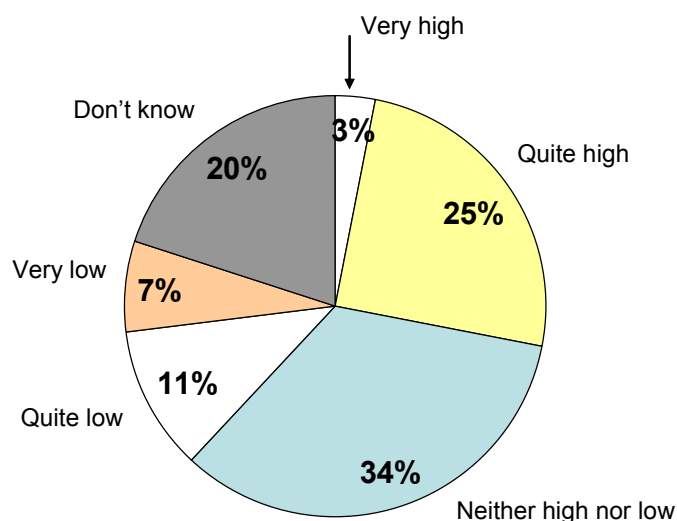
Base: all answering 2005 (1,027) and 2007 (1,720)

Rating standards of behaviour of local councillors

Almost three in ten rate the standard of behaviour of their local councillors as high (28%), while less than two in ten say low (18%).

One-third of respondents say the standard is neither high nor low (34%) and a further two in ten say they 'don't know' (20%). Both these findings suggest perhaps a low awareness of and contact with local councillors.

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



Base: All respondents (1,720)

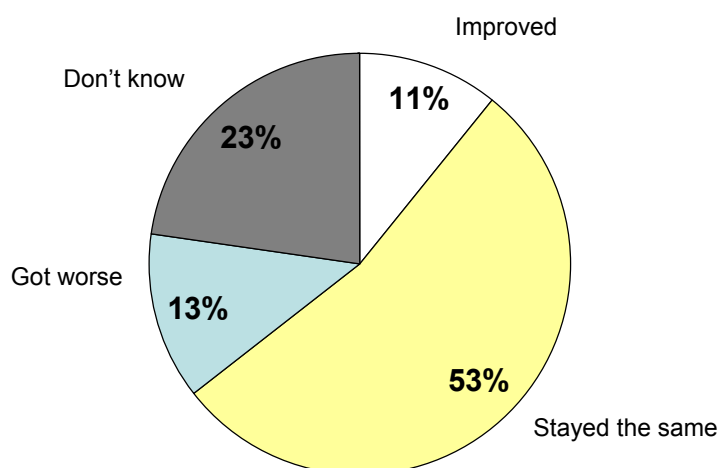
Those aged 55 and over are most positive about the standard of behaviour of local councillors (33%), compared to those aged 18-34s (26%) and 35-54 (24%).

Male respondents are more likely to report low standards of behaviour for their local councillors (21%) compared to women (15%).

Perceptions of changes in local councillor's behaviour

Over half of people say the standard of behaviour of local councillors in their local area has not changed over the last few years (54%). Just over one in ten say standards have improved (11%). In contrast around one in seven say they have got worse (13%).

Q In the last few years, do you think the standard of behaviour of local councillors in your area has improved, stayed the same or got worse?



Base: All respondents (1,720)

Around seven in ten 35-54 and 55 and overs (13% and 15% respectively) think standards have gotten worse, compared to just nine per cent of young people (aged 18 to 34 years).

Proportionately more people who say they have a disability or long term limiting illness, think standards of behaviour have got worse (17%), compared to those that do not have a disability or long term illness (12%), although it is likely that this is at least in part reflective of age.

Research commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life² found that the around three in ten of the general public thought that overall standards of conduct of all public office holders had improved (27%) and a further three in ten thought they had got worse (30%) and four in ten thought they had stayed the same (39%). The findings also showed that public opinion on this had also changed very little when compared to measures they had taken in 2003/4.

² Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2006, prepared by Ipsos MORI

Relationships with local councillors

Respondents were asked to select a statement that best reflects their interest in councillors and the work that they do.

Four in ten people are do like to know what councillors are doing, without getting involved (37%). The second most common response was that people are not interested in what councillors are doing and are also happy to let them get with it (27%).

Compared with 2005, increases can be seen in the proportions of those not interested in their councillors.

Table 4.1

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

	% 2005	%2007	% point difference
I'm not interested in what councillors do, or how they do their job	3	6	+3
I'm not interested in what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it	22	27	+5
I like to know what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it	44	37	-7
I would like to have more of a say in what councillors do	23	19	-4
I already know about councillors and feel able to get across my views	5	6	+1

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

A small proportion feel that they are well engaged with councillors and understand what they do (six per cent), while a further one in five would like more input than they currently have (19%).

As might be expected from responses to the previous questions, young people are more likely to say they are not interested in councillors or their work (8%) than older people (5%).

Similarly, older people (8%) are more likely than young people (2%) to say they are engaged with councillors and understand what they do.

Behaviours exhibited by local councillors

Respondents were asked to say to what extent councillors actually exhibit certain types of behaviour. Responses are shown in the table below.

Table 5.1

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

	% All	% Most	% About half	% A few	% None	Net apply ³
Treat people with respect	7	39	17	19	5	+22
Work in the interests of this neighbourhood	6	32	18	25	8	+5
They treat everyone equally	5	27	20	21	12	-1
They set a good example for others in their private lives	2	23	18	22	8	-5
They tell the truth	3	27	23	26	9	-5
They are in touch with what the general public thinks is important	3	23	24	27	12	-13
They use their power for their own personal gain	8	20	15	33	8	-13
They explain the reasons for actions and decisions	3	23	20	27	12	-13
They make sure that public money is used wisely	3	22	21	27	15	-17
They do what they promised they would do when elected	2	17	21	35	14	-30
Take bribes	2	6	5	27	24	-43
They own up when they make mistakes	2	11	13	36	23	-46

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

The behaviours were designed with MORI for the 2005 survey and are intended to loosely convey the sentiment of the ten Principles of conduct in local government (see Appendix 1 for which Principles each statement corresponds with).

Taking an overall measure of the positive and negative ratings (the net apply score), the public think councillors *do*:

- Treat people with respect; and
- Work in the interest of this neighbourhood.

³ 'Net apply' is calculated by subtracting '% do not apply' from '% apply'

In terms of the Principles of Public life then, the attributes that people think councillors exhibit relate to the qualities of respect for others, honesty and integrity.

The public do not think that, on balance, councillors exhibit any of the other behaviours (note that this is positive for two of the attributes: take bribes and use their power for their own personal gain). Here are the attributes the public think councillors do the least often:

- Do what they promised they would do when elected;
- Take bribes; or
- Own up when they make mistakes.

In terms of the Principles of Public life then, these attributed that councillors do not display relate to the qualities of honesty, integrity, duty to uphold the law and accountability.

The table below uses the net scores to compare what behaviours the public thought councillors were displaying in 2005 survey with the current survey findings.

Table 5.2
How many local councillors, if any, would you say each of the following statements applies to?

	% 2005 All / most	% 2007 All / most	Net difference
Explain the reasons for actions and decisions	-29	-13	+15
Tell the truth	-14	-5	+9
Make sure that public money is used wisely	-23	-17	+6
Do what they promised they would do when elected	-35	-30	+5
In touch with what the general public thinks is important	-13	-13	0
Own up when they make mistakes	-46	-46	0
Treat everyone equally	+2	-1	-3
Treat people with respect	+27	+22	-5
Set a good example for others in their private lives	0	-5	-5
Work in the interests of this neighbourhood	+15	+5	-10
Use their power for their own personal gain ⁴	-	-13	-
Take bribes ⁵	-	-43	-

⁴ Question wording different in 2005 was 'Not take bribes'.

⁵ Question wording different in 2005 was 'Not use their power for their own personal gain.'

Despite overall negative scores in 2007, the following behaviours are thought to be exhibited more often than in 2005:

- explaining the reasons for actions and decisions;
- tell the truth;
- makes sure that public money is used wisely; and
- do what they promised they would do when elected.

In terms of the Principles of Public life these behaviours relate to openness, honesty and integrity and stewardship.

However, the behaviours listed below are those that are thought to be exhibited less often than they were in 2005:

- treat everyone equally;
- treat people with respect;
- set a good example for others in their private lives; and
- work in the interests of this neighbourhood

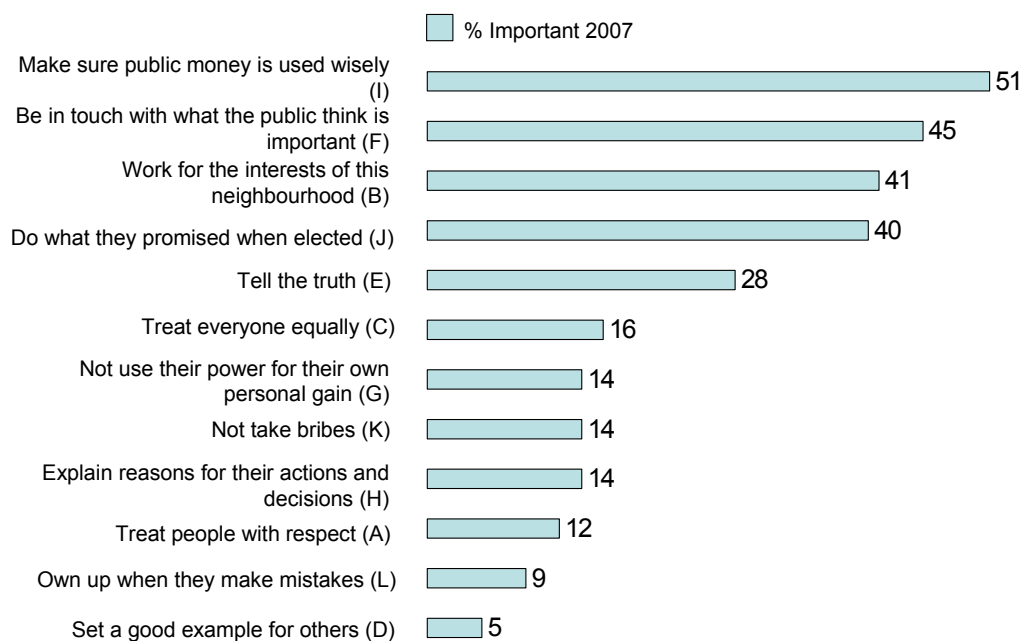
In terms of the Principles of Public life these behaviours relate to openness, honesty and integrity and stewardship objectivity, respect for others and leadership.

Important behaviours

The top three behaviours chosen as most important for councillors to do are: make sure that public money is used wisely (51%), be in touch with what the general public thinks is important (45%) and work for the interests of this neighbourhood (41%).

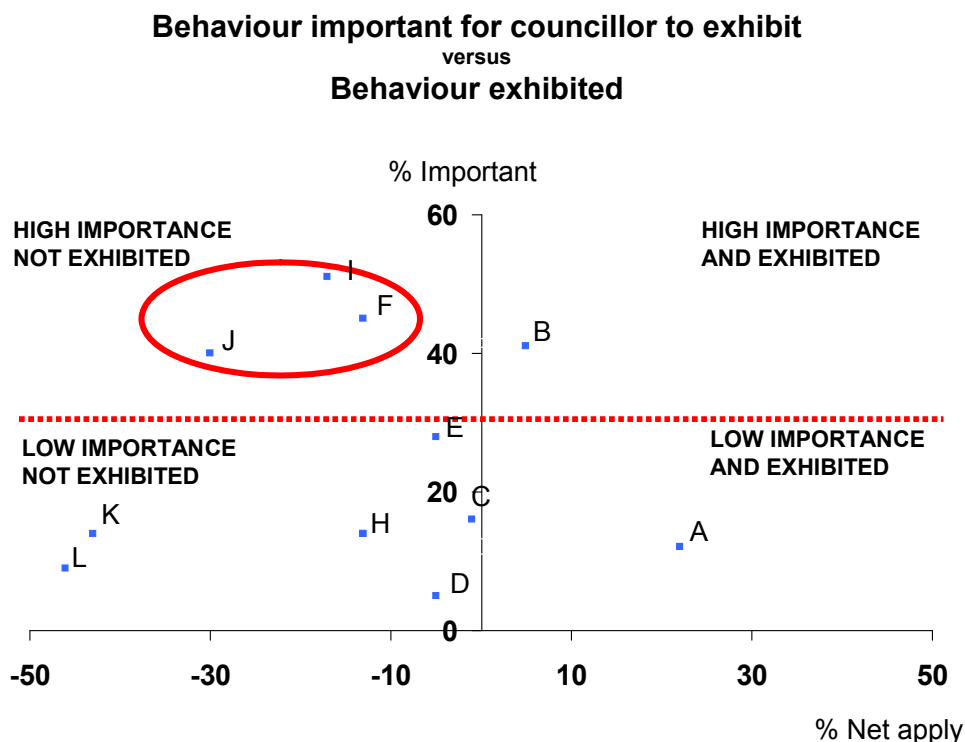
In contrast, behaviours rated least important are: set a good example for others in their private lives (5%) and own up when they make mistakes (9%).

Q Which three, if any, of the following do you think are the most important for local councillors to do?



Base: All respondents (1,720)

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



Behaviours that appear above the dotted line can be considered most important for councillors do. The further right the behaviour appears on the chart directly relates to the extent to which the public feel on balance this behaviour is exhibited by councillors. Behaviours that appear on the left are those that the public feel councillors are not doing overall.

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*' (B). This was also the case in 2005.

The attributes highlighted on the left represent those that people think are important for councillors to do, but that they do not think councillors are doing. These are: do what they promised when elected (J), make sure that public money is used wisely (I) and they are in touch with what the general public thinks is important (F). This was also the case in 2005.

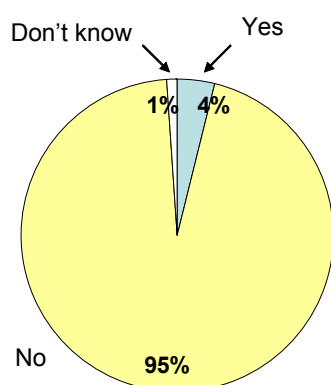
It would be reasonable to assume then that if councillors want the public to think more positively about them, then changing perceptions of their behaviour in these three areas would be very useful.

Experience of making a complaint

Only four per cent of people say they have ever made a complaint against a councillor.

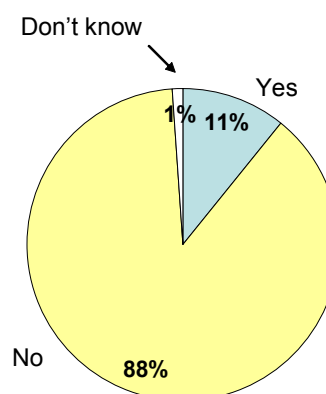
Around one in ten of those that have not made a complaint before, say they have *wanted* to (11%), while nine in ten of never have and never wanted to (89%).

Q Have you ever made a local complaint about a local councillor?



Base: All respondents (1,720)

Q Have you ever wanted to make a complaint about a local councillor?



Base: All respondents who have never made a complaint about a local councillor (xx)

People who are not working are more likely to have made a complaint (6%) than those who are (3%). Similarly, those who say they have a long term illness or disability are more likely to have made a complaint (8%) compared to those who do not (4%).

Of those who have never made a complaint, people aged 55 and over are more likely to have wanted to (12%) than younger people (8% of those aged 18-34), possibly unsurprisingly bearing in mind that older people are more engaged with councillors and more likely to understand what they do.

Knowing who to complain to

When asked (unprompted) who they would contact to make a complaint about a councillor most people said the council or the council complaints department (43%).

This could be considered evidence in support of the local filter as the council is the most mentioned organisation for respondents to contact with a complaint against a councillor.

Responses indicate low awareness of the Standards Board, with less than one per cent saying that is where they would direct their complaint.

A further one-third said they didn't know who they would contact (33%).

Table 8.1

If you wanted to make a complaint about a local councillor, who or which organisation would you contact? *Spontaneous*

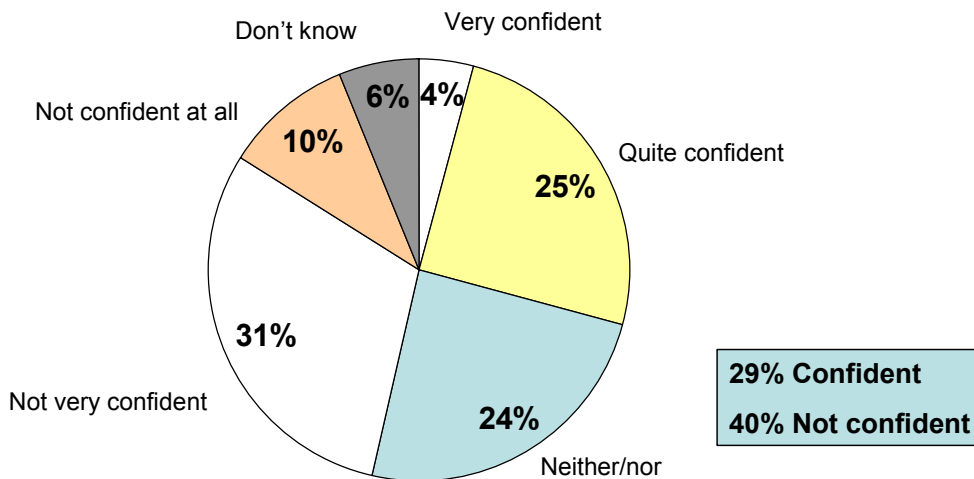
	%
Council	30
Council complaints department	13
Citizen's Advice Bureau	8
Local Government Ombudsman	6
MP	6
Would look on the internet	3
Another councillor	3
Media/local newspaper	2
Councillor standards committee/monitoring officer	2
Political party/party association/party leader	1
Council chief executive/chairman/leader/mayor	1
Department for Communities and Local Government	1
Councillor who the complaint is about	1
Police	*
The Electoral Commission	*
Committee on Standards in Public Life	*
The Standards Board for England	*
Solicitor	*
Other organisation	2
Don't know	33

Base: all answering (1,720)

Confidence in local authorities to deal with breaches

Despite the fact that local authorities are the most mentioned organisation for respondents to contact if they had a complaint against a councillor, confidence in local authorities to deal with standards issues is low. Although around three in ten say they are confident a breach would be uncovered (29%), a further four in ten are not (40%).

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?



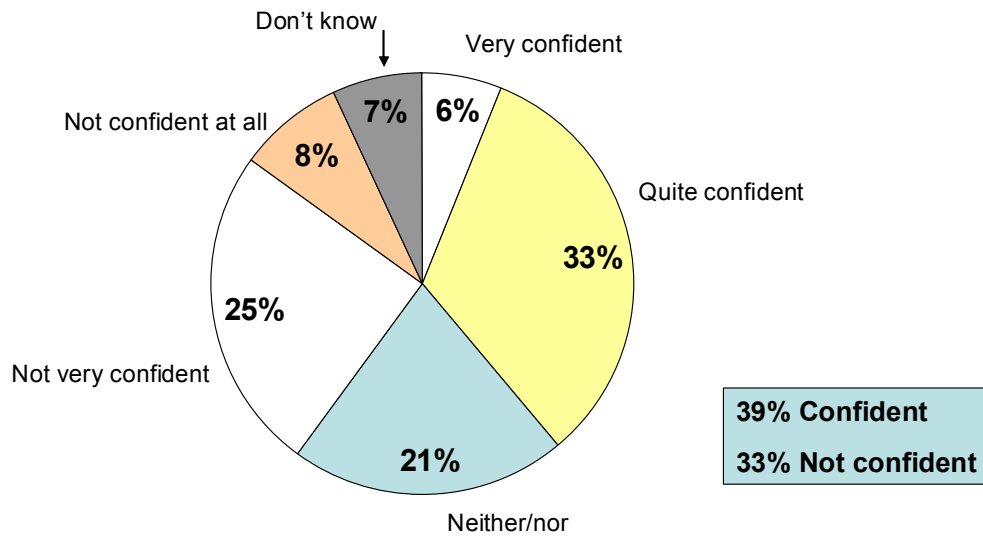
Base: All respondents (1,720)

Those in the older age group are more positive than the younger age groups, 33% of those aged 55 and over confident their authority would identify a breach, compared with 27% of 35-54 year olds.

Nearly half of people with a long term illness or disability are not confident (47%), compared to less than two in five who do not have a long term illness or disability (39%).

People have more confidence in an authority to deal appropriately with a breach once it has been uncovered than they have in the authority to uncover it in the first place. Nearly four in ten are confident it would get dealt with appropriately (39%), while one-third are not (33%).

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



Base: All respondents (1,720)

Appendix I

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