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<b>2009</b>	<b>Public Perceptions of Ethics</b>	
2008	Policy reference	200900353
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Policy briefing types	Author	Laura Wilkes
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<b>Overview</b>		
<p>Published by Standards for England, this report presents findings from the June 2009 research undertaken to monitor, and identify any changes over time in:</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Levels of public trust in member behaviour and integrity;</li> <li>• Levels of public confidence in the accountability mechanisms for dealing with instances where member behaviour has not met the required standard and</li> <li>• Public expectations of the behaviour of members.</li> </ul>		
<p>The report outlines a number of factors that impact upon public perceptions – many of which are outside the control of local government. This includes the MPs' expenses scandal, which is reported to have had a negative impact on public perceptions of councillors.</p>		
<p>That said, figures reported on a number of measures remain at similar levels to those recorded in 2007; demonstrating that public attitudes towards councillors have changed less markedly than for local MPs and the public are able to discern between local and national politicians.</p>		
<p>This briefing summarises the findings and conclusions of the report, and provides full comment at the conclusion.</p>		
<b>Briefing in full</b>		
<p>This research, conducted every two years, enables Standards for England 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.</p>		
<i>Trust</i>		
<p>Despite the MP's expenses scandal, the extent to which the public think local councillors tell the truth remains largely unchanged compared with 2007; and fell by just 2 percentage points to 28%. The report states that public attitudes towards councillors seems to have changed less markedly than for local MPs, where the figure dropped by 5 percentage points, to 24%. This suggests, according to Standards for England, that the public are able to distinguish between local and national politicians.</p>		
<i>Behaviour</i>		
<p>The most frequently expressed perception was that the standard of behaviour of</p>		

councillor behaviour is more likely to be rated as low than in 2007.

Interestingly, the report demonstrates that findings contrast with those from members and officers in local government, who have a more favourable perception of local councillors than the public do. The proportion that reported members' standards of behaviour has improved in their authority has increased, from 27% in 2005, to 44% in 2007 and now 47% in 2009.

The public were asked about the extent to which councillors exhibit certain types of behaviour – which the research loosely bases on the Nolan principles. The three behaviours 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%); and
- They use their power for their own personal gain (32%)

Respondents were also asked to rate how important they felt these behaviours to be, and they reported the following top three:

- Make sure that public money is used widely;
- Be in touch with what the general public thinks is important;
- Work in the interests of this neighbourhood.

The research also found that the public feel that the only attribute which it is important for councillors to exhibit and that councillors do actually exhibit is 'work in the interests of this neighbourhood'. Regarding what is important for councillors to do, but that the public do not think councillors are doing; the following was reported:

- Do what they promised when elected;
- Make sure that public money is used wisely; and
- They are in touch with what the general public thinks is important.

#### *Accountability Mechanisms*

Despite the rise in the proportion of the public who think the behaviour has got worse, the findings show that this does not translate into a corresponding rise in the number of complaints the public say that they have made about local councillors. In addition, of those who have not made a complaint, similar proportions in 2005, 2007 and 2009 have never wanted to make a complaint about their councillor.

The report records a drop of 4% since 2007 in the number of people who are confident that the local authority would uncover any issues relating to standards, which now stands at 25%. Similarly, the proportion of those who are not confident that breaches in standards would be uncovered has increased by 6% since 2007 to 46% and the levels of confidence that local authorities will deal appropriately with breaches in standards of behaviour have also dropped. Therefore, whilst public perceptions of councillors have mostly held up against the MPs' scandal, the report notes that by contrast, local authorities seem to have suffered.

Conversely, 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. Similarly, they are more than twice as likely, compared with the public, to think that a councillor would be dealt with appropriately if their behaviour was deemed unacceptable.

#### *Conclusions*

The report concludes that the findings demonstrate that public attitudes towards councillors have changed less markedly than for local MPs, politicians generally and government ministers. Therefore, in light of the MPs' expenses scandal, the public are able to discern between local and national politicians.

It is also noted that findings which suggest people are less confident that local

trend of reducing satisfaction. Many of the key drivers impacting on satisfaction are not concerned directly with service provision, but of those that are within the control of local authorities, public awareness is something that could be improved upon. The report suggests that there is room for improvement in the levels of public awareness of issues such as the role and existence of standards committees, and that this may be the key to increased confidence in local authorities to deal with breaches in standards.

The report also concludes that it would be reasonable to assume that if councillors want the public to think more positively about them, changing their perceptions would be very useful. Particularly in the key areas of election promises, wise use of public money and being in touch with what the public thinks; as these areas represent things that people think are important for councillors to do, but things that they do not think councillors are currently doing.

### **Comment**

This research report represents a welcome insight into public perceptions of councillors, and depending how you wish to interpret it, has both positive and negative interpretations. It is important to bear in mind that this research does come with 'health warnings'. While it is important to measure and monitor public perceptions there are a variety of factors which influence them, many of which are outside the control of local government and local politicians. Changing public perceptions of councillors may be an uphill struggle.

To turn first to the positives; it is encouraging that people recognise the difference between politicians at local and national level. As a result, the MPs' expenses scandal has not had as great an impact on the perception of councillors as may have been expected.

It is also encouraging that those who work most closely with members; members themselves and local authority officers, have a much higher perception of members' behaviour and the ability of local authorities to uncover a breach in behaviour. This suggests that having an understanding of the processes that are in place for uncovering a slip in standards can improve perceptions. This is something that local authorities have control over, and perhaps communication of these mechanisms will be vital in changing perceptions.

There are also areas which councillors themselves can control and therefore strive to change; namely behaviours. Two of the behaviours that respondents felt were the most important; being in touch with that the general public and working in the interests of the neighbourhood, arguably are things that councillors can do something about. This highlights the importance of councillors' effective engagement with their local communities in order to listen to their concerns and find out what is important to them.

Now for the negatives. Despite the fact that the MPs' expenses scandal had little impact on the extent to which the public think local councillors tell the truth, the figure remains extremely low. Only 28% of people think that local councillors tell the truth, or put another way, this suggests that almost three quarters of people think that councillors do not tell the truth.

Similarly, the figure for the most frequently expressed perception regarding standard of behaviour which was neither high nor low stands at 35% - this is a large amount of people that sit on the fence, seemingly unaware of how councillors behave. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that they have no direct experience of their councillors to make an informed judgement on their standard of behaviour. On some levels, this questions the role of councillors as community champions who know their communities well.

On behaviour, of the top three rated most as important, the public felt that only one of these behaviours was actually exhibited; 'work in the interests of the neighbourhood'. Yet even this only received 30% - not a particularly large number. 'Making sure that public money was spent wisely' and 'being in touch with what the general public thinks is important', the public felt were not exhibited by councillors. It is, perhaps, slightly concerning to think that the public do not feel councillors are in touch with what the public wants: surely, as representatives of

the people, their purpose is to do precisely this task? This does raise the question as to what councillors are doing if they are not consulting and meeting with constituents about the issues that matter to them.

Almost one third of respondents (32%) felt that one of the most frequently exhibited behaviours of councillors was that they used their power for personal gain. This is startling, and suggests that many people do not trust the motivations of their councillors.

Finally, the report notes that it is perhaps surprising that the general public do not want more of an oversight of what councillors do; only 21% of people would like to have more of a say in what councillors do. Given the economic climate that now faces local government and the difficult spending decisions that councillors will inevitably have to make, it will be increasingly important to encourage local people to be involved in these decisions and the work that councillors do. Local authorities and councillors will need to start work on changing this figure now.

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