

Item 4

REPORT TO STANDARDS COMMITTEE

2ND NOVEMBER 2006

REPORT OF SOLICITOR TO THE COUNCIL AND MONITORING OFFICER

SURVEY OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONDUCT IN PUBLIC LIFE 2006

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the findings of a national quantitative study into Public Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life. The survey was commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and assesses public attitudes, expectations and perceptions towards the behaviour of those in public life.
- 1.2 John Major established the Committee on Standards in public Life in October 1994, the Committee was given wide terms of reference: "To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life".
- 1.3 The Committee is looked upon as an ethical workshop called in to do running repairs, which continues to monitor the ethical environment and respond to issues of concern that may arise.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Standards Committee be appraised of the report and that further similar reports be made annually.

3. DETAIL

- 3.1 **Overall Perceptions of Standards in Public Life:** The survey aimed to explore what the public considers acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on the part of elected and appointed holders of public office; how far the public believe that the behaviour of holders of public office is acceptable or unacceptable; and how effectively the public feel office-holders are held responsible and accountable for their conduct.
- 3.2 People generally tend to see the overall standards of conduct of public office-holders in moderately positive terms, although 12 % consider that standards are low.
- 3.3 *Standards in the UK compared with elsewhere in Europe:* Just over two fifths of adults believe that Standards of conduct among public office-holders in the UK are about average when compared to elsewhere in Europe. The remainder of adults in Great Britain are split

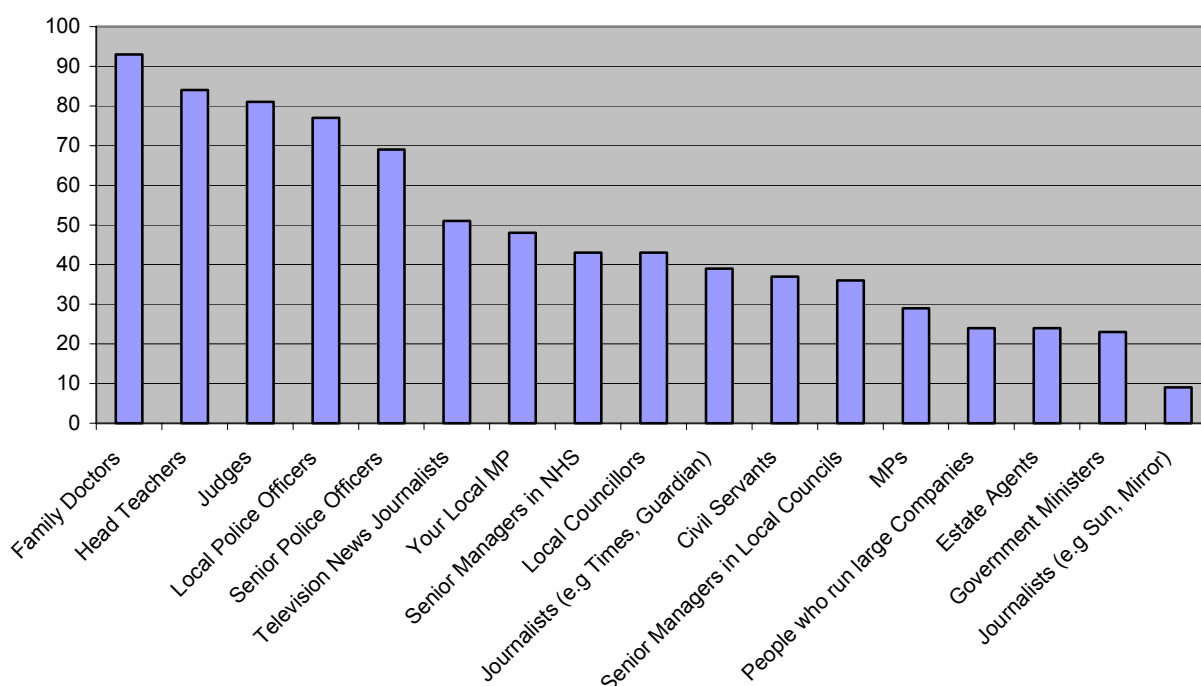
by a ratio of three to one in thinking that UK standards are higher rather than lower than the European average (31% vs. 11%).

3.4 **Trust in Public Office-Holders:** The graph below shows the proportion of adults who say they would generally trust people from different professions to tell the truth. It is clear from the survey results that front-line public servants are more trusted than other types of public officials, this reflects what other studies have found; namely, that the closer the public are to an individual or institution (or at least the closer the public perceives them to be), the more likely they are to trust them.

3.5 The importance of familiarity and distance applies to how people view and trust their politicians, - local Councillors (43%) and the local MPs (48%) are both better regarded than MPs in general (29%) and government ministers (23%).

3.6 While the low level of trust in MPs generally is a common source of media comment, it should be noted that journalists suffer from a similar deficit.

Trust in Different Professional Groups



3.7 **National Politicians: Expectations and Perceptions of Standards:** Respondents to this part of the survey rated their expectations of MPs and Government Ministers, based on a series of ten different behaviours rating from extremely important through to not at all important.

3.8 The most important characteristic for MPs and government ministers is that they should not take bribes (85% of the public say this is extremely important), which reflects the high value the public place on their elected politicians not to break the law. Following this around 75% of respondents say it is extremely important that MPs and government

ministers tell the truth, around 72% say that public money should be used widely and power should not be used for own personal gain.

- 3.9 **Senior Public Officials: Expectations and Perceptions of Standards:** The public make only small distinctions between what they expect of senior public officials and their expectations of MPs and government ministers. Again the highest rated category of expectation for a senior public official is not taking bribes.
- 3.10 Not only do the public hold appointed officials to the same standards as elected ones in their job performance, 52% say that it is very important for senior public officials to set a good example in their private lives.
- 3.11 It is evident that more of the public take a positive than negative view of public officials' behaviour in almost all the respects measured. Only 4% think that "most" senior public officials take bribes compared to the 51% who feel that most or all officials are dedicated to doing a good job for the public.
- 3.12 **MPs and Voting in Parliament:** Perceptions about the factors that ought to guide MPs when voting in Parliament, and the factors believed to actually guide them provide important insights into how the public view the role of MPs and the behaviour of their elected representatives. The responses to such questions can also provide a useful measure against which to compare public perceptions with reality, highlighting in the process some contradictions and misapprehensions that may exist in the public mind.
- 3.13 The survey finds that the vast majority of people believe that it is reasonable for MPs, when voting on important issues affecting the whole country, to take account of what would benefit people living in the country as a whole (95%); what the MP's party election manifesto promised (81%); and what would benefit people living in the MP's local constituency (80%).
- 3.14 However, in contrast the public do not want the MPs to prioritise their own interests when voting on national issues. This is not to say that the public feels MPs should discount their own personal view of issues when deciding how to vote, rather it is an issue of personal gain; over three in four adults say it is not acceptable for MPs to base their decisions on how it might affect their political career.
- 3.15 There is a clear consensus (66%) that the most important factor an MP should take into account when voting on a national issue affecting the whole country is what would benefit the country as a whole.
- 3.16 **Views on Public Sector Recruitment Practice:** When recruiting people to government departments or other public services the most important principle considered by the public is that the job should be awarded to the best candidate.
- 3.17 However, the public is sceptical about how public office-holders get their jobs. There is widespread belief that proper procedures are

frequently not used when recruiting people to public office. Two in three adults think that people do get jobs through someone they know rather than through correct procedures. It is believed that local authorities are clamping down more on unfair recruitment.

- 3.18 **Media Scrutiny and the Private Lives of Public Office-Holders:** It is important to understand the extent to which the public believe that public office-holders have the right to a private life against differing levels of media scrutiny. 54 % of the public believe that local councillors should accept a certain level of media interest in their private lives, however, a small minority, around one in ten would argue that local councillors and senior public officials should accept that the media examine every aspect of their private lives because it “comes with the job”.
- 3.19 **Public Office-Holders and Accountability:** 58 % of the public are confident that the authorities in the UK are committed to improving standards in public life, however, are not confident that authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing or punish those in public office who are caught doing wrong.
- 3.20 **Conclusion:** This survey confirms that the public wants public office-holders to be more honest and truthful about policies and services, acknowledging difficulties and competing pressures, and also admitting or owning up when things go wrong or have unintended consequences.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 No specific financial implications have been identified.

5. CONSULTATIONS

- 5.1 The Council’s Management Team has considered this report.

6. OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 All material considerations have been taken into account in the contents of this Report. In particular, risks may arise unless Members of Council are fully appraised on standards matters.

7. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None apply.

8. LIST OF APPENDICES

- 8.1 None apply.

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Wards: N/A

Key Decision Validation: N/A

Background Papers

Survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life 2006

Examination by Statutory Officers

	Yes	Not Applicable
1. The report has been examined by the Council's Head of the Paid Service or his representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The content has been examined by the Council's S.151 Officer or his representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The content has been examined by the Council's Monitoring Officer or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The report has been approved by Management Team	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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