

# CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

## REPORT TO: STANDARDS COMMITTEE

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	21 <sup>st</sup> September 2009
<b>Report of:</b>	Monitoring Officer
<b>Subject/Title:</b>	Public Perceptions of Ethics

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### **1.0 Report Summary**

- 1.1 The report outlines the results of the recent biennial survey conducted by the Standards Board for England into 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 relate to measures of perceptions taken in June 2009, and comparisons have been made with data collected in 2005 and 2007.

### **2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The report is for information only.

### **3.0 Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1 Not applicable.

### **4.0 Wards Affected**

- 4.1 Not applicable.

### **5.0 Local Ward Members**

- 5.1 Not applicable.

### **6.0 Policy Implications**

- 6.1 None identified. However, the results of the survey will be used to inform the Standards Board for England's future policy direction, which in turn, will impact on the work of Standards Committees generally.

### **7.0 Financial Implications for Transition Costs (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)**

- 7.1 None identified.

## **8.0 Financial Implications 2009/10 and beyond (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)**

8.1 None identified.

## **9.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)**

9.1 None identified.

## **10.0 Risk Management**

10.1 Not applicable.

## **11.0 Background and Options**

11.1 The Standards Board for England conducts a biennial survey to measure and monitor the public's perceptions of local councillors' ethical standards and its confidence in the redress mechanisms for dealing with shortcomings in individuals' behaviour.

11.2 Its last survey was in 2007, and in 2009, it commissioned the MORI Social Research Institute to investigate the public's perceptions of ethics and attitudes towards local government in order to inform future policy direction.

11.3 The aims of the research are –

- (i) to establish benchmarks of public confidence in local democracy;
- (ii) to examine what behaviour by Members, the public deems acceptable and unacceptable;
- (iii) to investigate how the public develops views on Members' ethical behaviour and about local government and how critical these views are when compared with other factors; and
- (iv) to establish benchmarks of the general public's awareness and perceptions of The Standards Board,

11.4 The findings presented in its latest report represent a summary of the main 2009 findings.

The method adopted was to interview a total of 1,753 (weighted) adults who were interviewed face-to-face in their homes, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing. Interviews took place between 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

11.5 Caution should be exercised in interpreting perception data. Ipsos MORI (Duffy, 2009) identified five key areas in particular which should be noted -

- (i) Perceptions are just that, and people can be wrong;

- (ii) Media influence on public opinion and their role in agenda-setting of current issues;
- (iii) Relationship between people's political values and the way in which they rate services;
- (iv) Expectations of service-users are rising;
- (v) The way in which people view their local area had been found to be an indicator of satisfaction with services.

Other factors found to influence public perceptions of services are experiences of Council services, levels of Council Tax, the political party in control and the extent to which individuals identify with their local area.

## 11.6 Findings

The field work for the survey was undertaken in June 2009 and it was to be expected that the MPs' expenses scandal would have an impact on public perceptions of MPs. It was also considered likely that this might also impact on perceptions of local councillors.

- 11.7 Participants were asked a series of questions to establish whether local MPS, Government Ministers and politicians generally tell the truth either "all" or "most of the time". This has fallen since 2007 (-5%, -3% and -3% respectively). Over the same period, perceptions that these groups "rarely" or "never" tell the truth, have increased significantly (+9%, +9% and +10% respectively).

However, in 2009 and post the MPs' expenses scandal, the extent to which the public thinks local councillors tell the truth remains largely unchanged, compared with 2007. The findings show that whilst there has been a negative impact on public attitudes towards local councillors, there has been a more marked effect on perceptions of local MPs, politicians generally and Government Ministers. This suggests that the public are able to distinguish between local and national politicians.

## 11.8 Complaints

The vast majority of the public have never made a complaint about their local councillor to the Council.

The rise in the proportion of the public who think that the behaviour of local councillors has deteriorated does not translate into a corresponding rise in the number of complaints the public say they have made about local councillors. The level of complaints is similar for 2005, 2007 and 2009 (3%, 4% and 3% respectively).

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).

- 11.9 Survey participants were 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 (34%).

Respondents were asked the extent to which they thought local councillors exhibited certain types of behaviour (see Appendix 1). The behaviours were based on the Nolan principles (see Appendix 2).

The three behaviours which 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%).

The public are now more likely to say that only “a few” or “none” of their local councillors undertake the behaviours outlined in Appendix 1.

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%)

- 11.10 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 (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 operate services.

One-quarter of respondents in the survey were confident that the local authority would uncover any issues, representing a 4% drop in confidence compared with 2007. The proportion of those who were not confident that breaches in standards would be uncovered has increased from 40% in 2007 to 46% in 2009.

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.

- 11.11 The survey also included an assessment of public awareness of Standards Committees. Only one in five (19%) said they knew that their local authority had a Standards Committee. Of those, eight in ten

said they knew “not very much” or “nothing at all” about what it did (79%). Four in ten said they did not know whether or not their local authority had a Standards Committee (42%).

- 11.12 The survey included an assessment of levels of public interest in what councillors do, and how they do their jobs. Of a set of statements, the most common response (36%) was “I like to know what councillors are doing but I am happy to let them get on with it”, followed by “I’m not interested in what councillors do as long as they do their job” (28%).

Compared with 2005, in 2007 there was an increase in the proportion of those not interested in their councillors and this increase has been sustained in 2009.

- 11.13 Although public perceptions are an important part in assessing impacts on the local standards framework, it cannot be used in isolation to measure impact. As noted above, there are a variety of factors which influence public perceptions, many of which are outside the control of local government and local politicians and partly because there will be other changes which have occurred alongside the local standards framework. The research undertaken is part of a wider research programme which seeks to assess the impacts of the local standards framework.

## **12.0 Overview of Year One and Term One Issues**

- 12.1 This is the first occasion on which the Standards Committee has received the biennial survey results.

## **13.0 Access to Information**

### **Background paper:**

Standards for England “Public perceptions of ethics” – July 2009

The background paper relating to this report can be inspected, or a copy provided, by contacting the report writer:

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