

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aims and objectives

This report presents the findings of a 2005/06 survey of public attitudes in the United Kingdom, commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and conducted by the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute; comparisons are made with a previous survey which was carried out in 2003/04 across Great Britain by BMRB. The Scottish Executive and the Northern Ireland Administration provided financial contributions to enable this survey to be conducted on a UK-wide basis.

It aims 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.

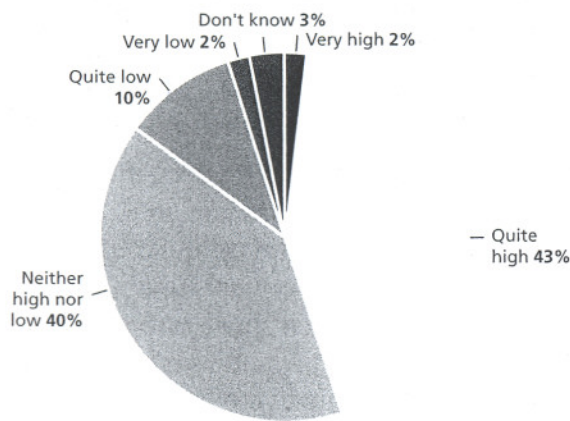
Overall perceptions of standards in public life

People in Great Britain tend to see the overall standards of conduct of public office-holders in moderately positive terms. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, though only one in eight (12%) consider that standards are low, less than half say they would rate them as high (45%). More than two in five adults in Britain say either that overall standards in public life are neither high nor low (40%), or that they don't know (3%).

Only 2% consider standards to be "very high", although equally only 2% rate them as "very low".

Figure 1: Overall ratings for standards of conduct

Q Overall, how would you rate the standard of conduct of public office-holders in the United Kingdom?



	2004		2006	
	GB	GB	Scot.	N.I.
Very/quite high	46%	45%	46%	35%
Neither	42%	40%	38%	45%
Very/quite low	11%	12%	11%	17%
Don't know	2%	3%	4%	3%

Base: 491 adults in Scotland
 403 adults in N.I.
 2004 = 1,097

Base: 1,446 adults (18+) in Britain, incl. 491 in Scotland

Source: Ipsos MORI/C SPL

There have been few substantial changes in public opinion since the 2003/04 survey: the public are no more likely to consider standards low now than they did then. However, many of the public feel things are changing, though these are roughly balanced between the 27% who feel standards have improved in the last few years and the 30% who think things have got worse.

Trust in public office-holders

Politicians are much less trusted to tell the truth than members of most professions: while the vast majority of the public say they trust doctors, teachers, judges and police officers, less than a quarter trust government ministers, as few as trust estate agents; three in ten trust "MPs in general".

On the other hand, almost half trust their local MP, which is twice as many as trust government ministers, and more than trust "top civil servants" or senior managers in local councils. There is a general pattern of higher trust for front-line or local public servants than for managers or administrators in the same service.

Although most of the public say they would not trust MPs in general or government ministers to tell the truth, only a minority – around three in ten – feel that in practice just a few, or no, MPs or ministers do tell the truth. Nevertheless, only one in ten believe that all or most MPs or ministers own up when they make mistakes, and a quarter that they explain the reasons for their actions and decisions.

Public expectations and perceptions of standards

The integrity of those who hold public office matters to the public. More people say it is very important that MPs and government ministers should not take bribes, that they should tell the truth and that they should not use their power for their own personal gain than think it is very important they should be competent at their jobs.

Truthfulness is highly prized. Three-quarters of the public think it is "extremely important" that MPs and government ministers should tell the truth – only the requirement that they should not take bribes is rated as important by more of the public.

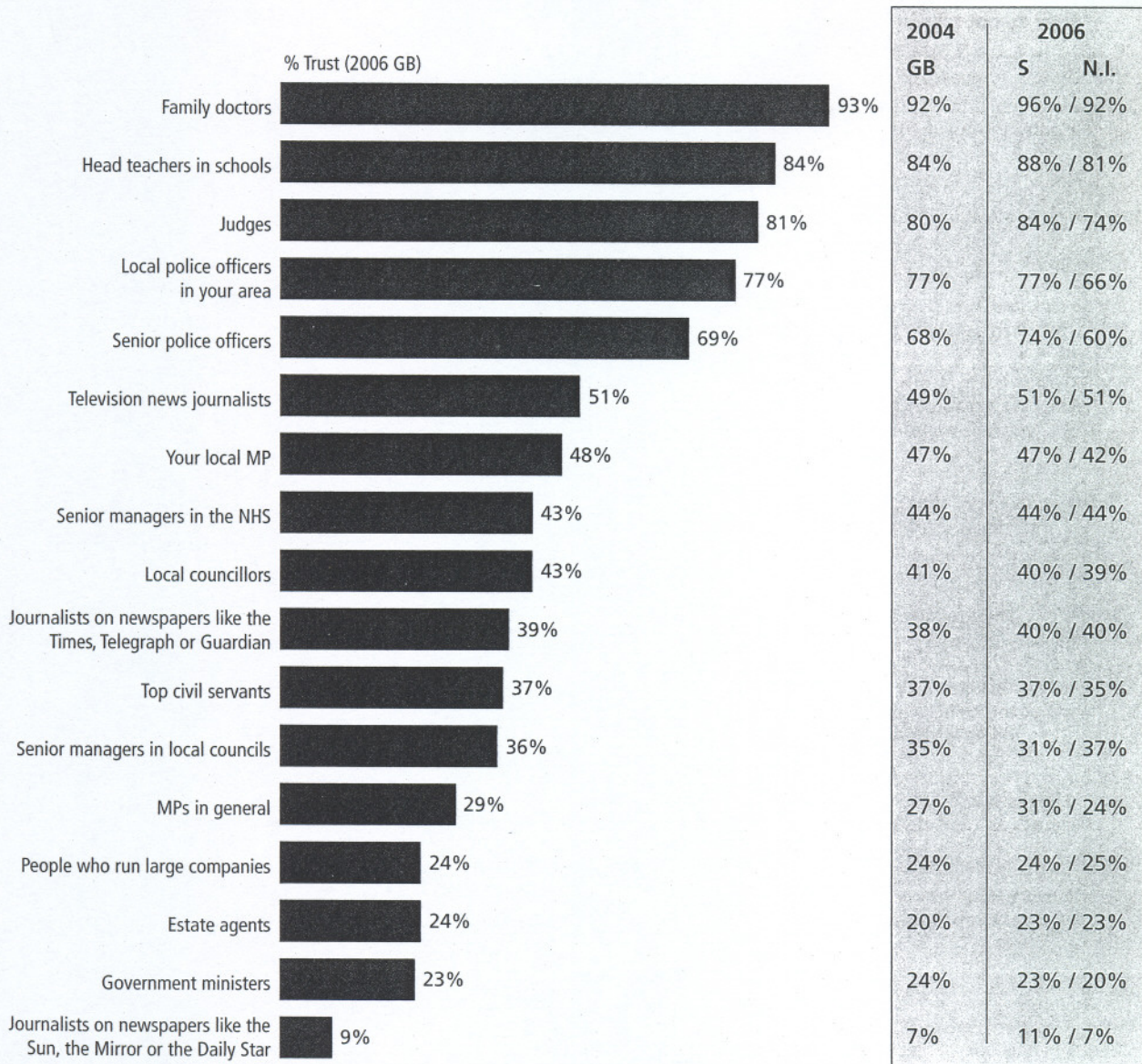
The public also rate highly the importance of those in public office not using their power for their own personal gain: three-quarters think it very important that MPs and ministers do not use their power for their own personal gain (and only a minority believe that most MPs or ministers actually do so).

Few of the public suspect politicians as a group of outright corruption – only 7% say they think "all" or "most" government ministers take bribes, and 6% that all or most MPs do. However, the 2006 survey found a greater degree of public doubt than in 2003/04: while the last survey found 80% saying that few or no MPs take bribes and only 3% that they didn't know, the present survey found 21% saying "don't know", with those prepared to express confidence that such abuse is rare falling to 63%. A similar shift in opinion was found in perceptions of whether government ministers take bribes or not. This sharp change from the results of the previous survey applied only to the question of bribery; there was no movement to any similar degree in other aspects of politicians' perceived behaviour.

The public apply very similar standards to senior public officials as they do to MPs and government ministers in terms of the behaviour they demand. In general they express somewhat more confidence that officials are meeting those standards than that politicians are doing so.

Figure 2: Trust in different professional groups

Q These cards show different types of people. Please put them on this board to show which you would generally trust to tell the truth and which you wouldn't.



Base: 1,446 adults (18+) in Britain, incl. 491 in Scotland.

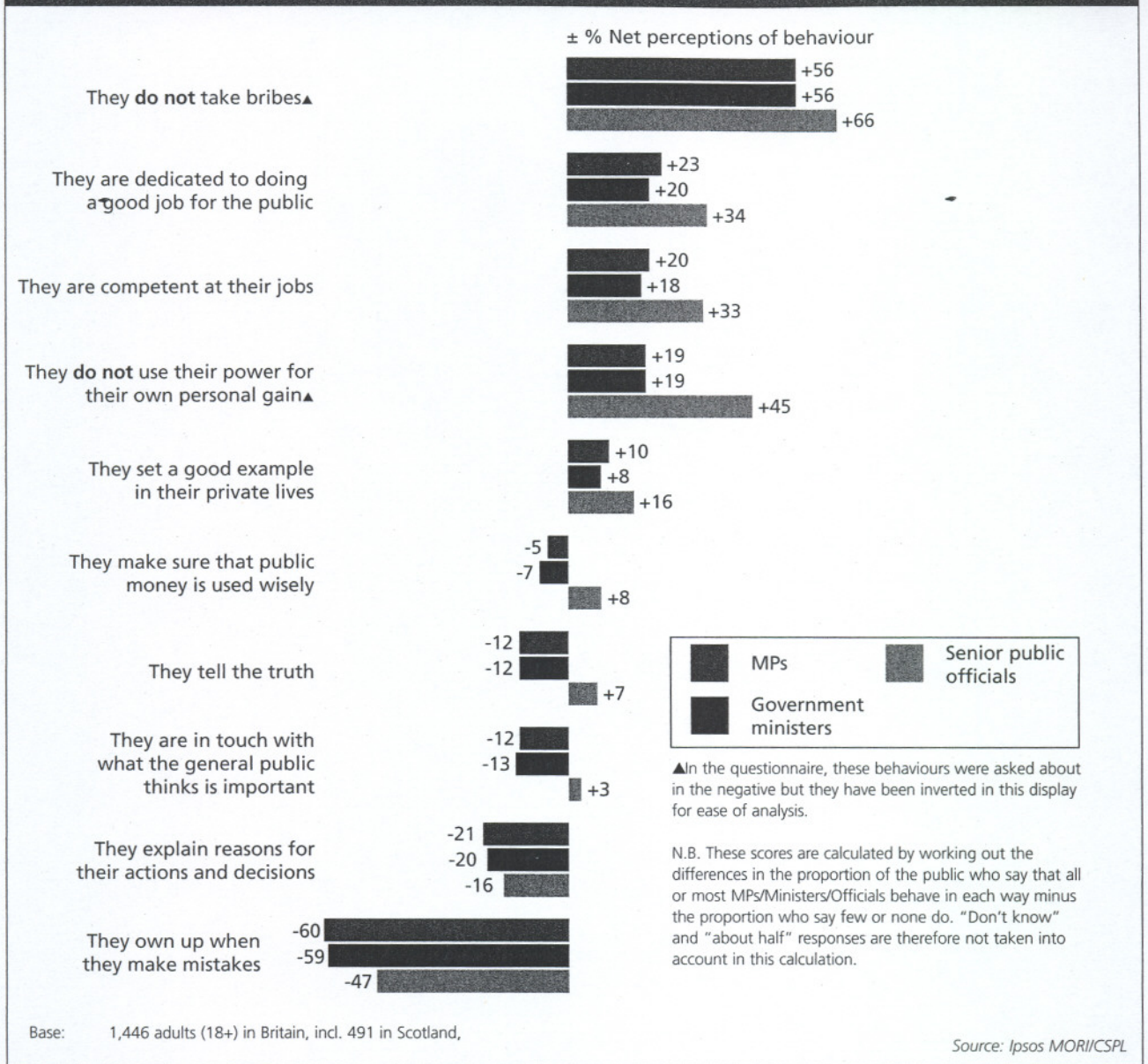
Base: 491 adults in Scotland
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Source: Ipsos MORI/CSPL

MPs and voting in Parliament

The vast majority of the public say that it is reasonable for an MP when voting on national issues in Parliament to take into account what would benefit people living in the country as a whole (95%), what the MP's party's election manifesto promised (81%) and what would benefit people living in the MP's local constituency (80%). Over half the public also say it is acceptable to base decisions on what the MP personally believes to be right (71%) and what the MP's local party members would want (58%).

Figure 3: Perceptions of MPs' vs. government ministers' vs. senior public officials' actual behaviour



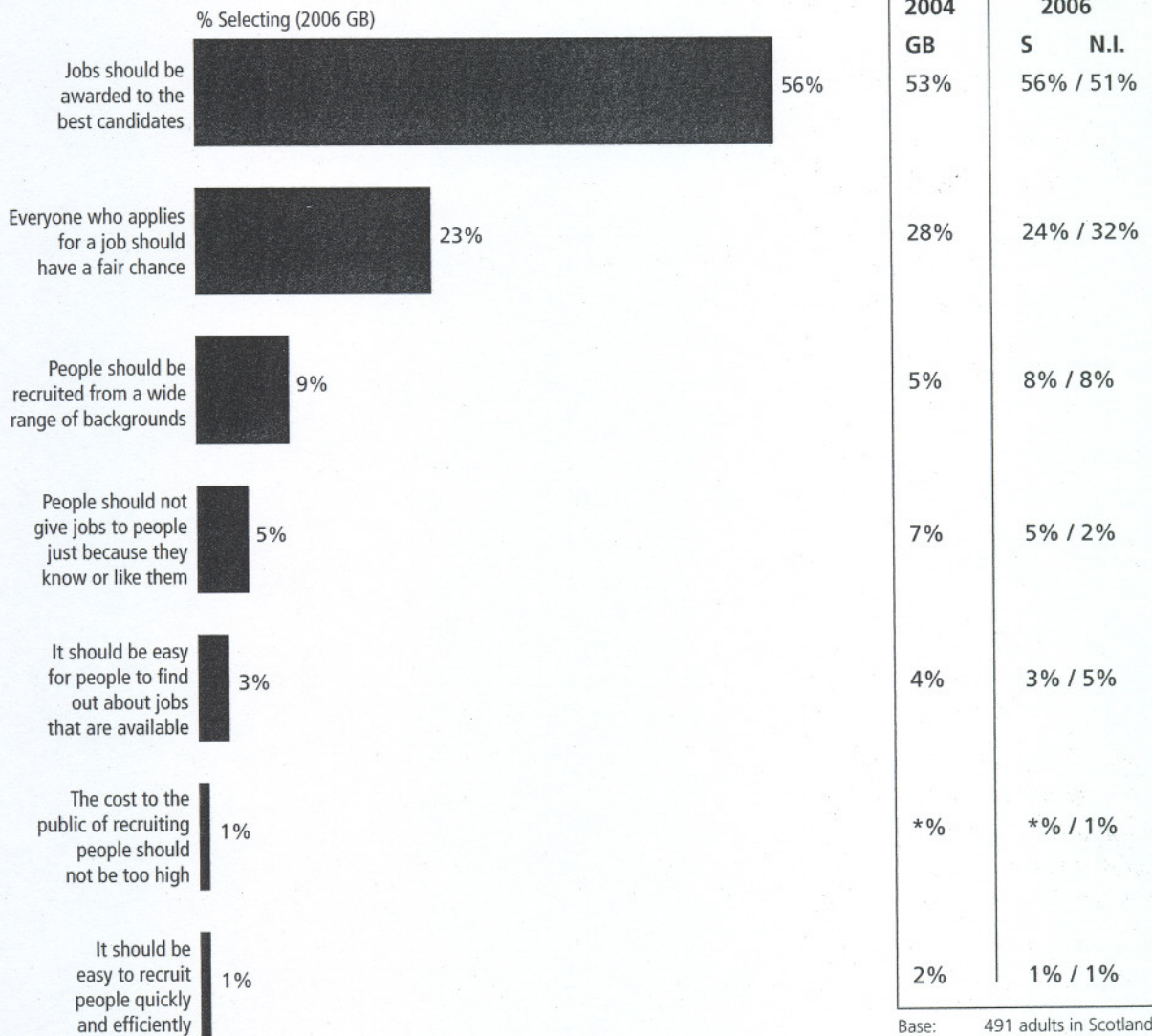
Only a small proportion of the public accept an MP taking into account factors such as what would benefit his/her own family or how the decision might affect his/her career. But while very few (just 2%) think that in practice most MPs would base their decision principally on benefiting their families, a significant proportion (14%) feel that how the decision will affect the MP's career would be the principal factor – almost as many as believe that the main motivation would be what would benefit people living in the country as a whole (17%).

Views on public sector recruitment practice

When given a straight choice they place more emphasis on the right outcome rather than the process of recruitment: more than twice as many feel it is most important that the best candidate should get the job as that every applicant should have a fair chance. Therefore, although two-thirds believe that people in public office get jobs through someone they know, rather than through the correct procedures, at least a fair amount of the time, this may only generate significant public concern if the perception is that the right person has *not* got the job.

Figure 4: Most important factors when recruiting for jobs

Q Now I would like to ask you about the way government departments and other public services recruit people for jobs. In your opinion, which ONE of these things is the most important when government departments and other public services are recruiting people for jobs?



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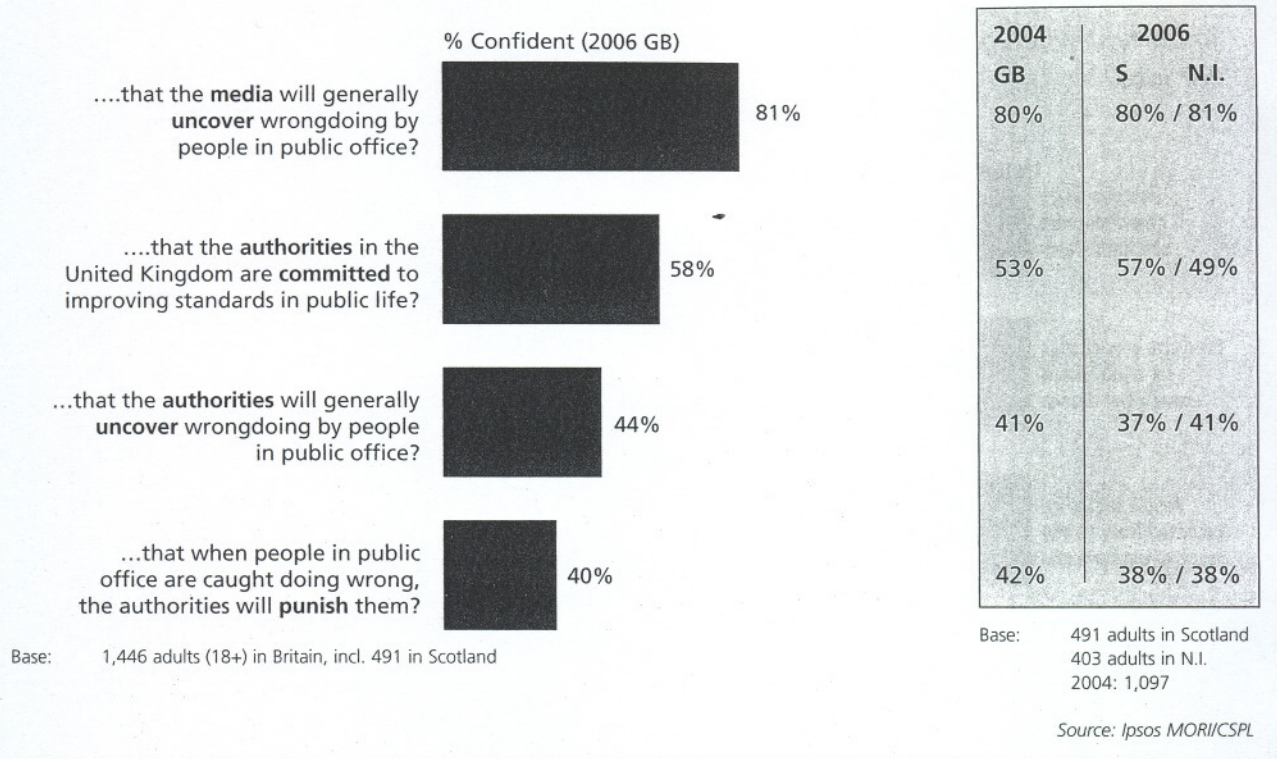
Public office-holders, accountability and media scrutiny

The public's confidence that office-holders will be held accountable for their conduct is limited. While the majority believe that the UK authorities are committed to improving standards in public life, only a minority (a little over two in five) say they are confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing or that they will punish those in public office who are caught doing wrong.

Four in five, though, say they have confidence in the ability of the media to uncover wrongdoing by people in public office, which may explain why almost three-quarters feel ministers and MPs must accept some media intrusion into their private lives. Somewhat fewer, but still a majority, feel that local councillors and senior public officials must similarly expect at least some media scrutiny in their private as well as public lives.

Figure 5: Confidence in authorities and the media

Q And how confident do you feel...?



Scotland and Northern Ireland

In the 2006 survey (unlike that of 2003/04) interviews were conducted in Northern Ireland as well as in Great Britain, and extra "booster" interviews were conducted in Northern Ireland and Scotland to provide a robust sample size allowing for comparison with the results for England and Wales. Separate chapters on attitudes in Northern Ireland and Scotland are included in the report.

Attitudes in Scotland are generally in line with attitudes in England and Wales: four times as many adults in Scotland believe that standards of conduct of public office-holders in the UK are high as believe they are low. Furthermore, when asked about the position in Scotland, a clear majority of adults in Scotland (58%) believe that standards in Scotland are about the same as in other parts of the United Kingdom.

One significant difference in opinions is that people in Scotland are considerably more likely than those in England and Wales to pick the interests of the constituency as the single most important factor an MP should take into account when voting, 21% in Scotland say that this is most important, almost twice as many as the 12% who say so in England and Wales. Nevertheless, in Scotland as in the rest of the UK the majority say "what would benefit the country as a whole" is the most important factor to take into account, and there are no significant differences between Scottish views and those in England and Wales on which factors, in practice, MPs do take into account.

Scotland is marginally more sceptical than England and Wales about openness by government ministers: more adults in Scotland believe that few or no government ministers would own up when they make mistakes (75% say so, compared to 68% in England and Wales), and similarly fewer adults in Scotland than in England and Wales think all or most government ministers explain the reasons for their actions and decisions (19% and 25%, respectively).

Adults in Northern Ireland rate general standards of conduct of public office-holders lower than do people in Great Britain; nevertheless, around a third of Northern Ireland adults believe standards of conduct are high, twice as many as believe them to be low.

Opinions in Northern Ireland differ somewhat from those in Great Britain on the principles of recruitment to the public sector. Although, as elsewhere, the most frequently chosen criterion is that the best candidate should be awarded the job, a third (32%) in Northern Ireland say that everyone having a fair chance should be the single most important principle – only 23% say this in England and Wales. But people in Northern Ireland are also twice as likely as people in England and Wales to say that people getting public sector jobs “through someone they know rather than through correct procedures” never or hardly ever happens (10% vs. 4% in England and Wales).