

**What the Public Thinks about Employee  
Behaviour in the Queensland Public Service  
and Local Councils**

Research and Prevention Division  
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**The CJC's mission is to promote integrity in the Queensland Public Sector and an effective, fair and accessible criminal justice system.**

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## Key findings

### General views on behaviour

#### Public service employee behaviour

The majority of respondents believed that most government employees were honest (75%) and that the public service was largely free of individuals who behaved badly (78%). Most respondents (84%) also believed that there would always be some degree of government corruption.

At the same time, 58 per cent of respondents considered that more should be done about reducing government corruption and about half felt that there was only a slim chance of wrongdoing being detected in a government job.

A little more than half of the respondents were confident of a proper investigation if they were to make a complaint against a public service employee. However, around 28 per cent felt that there was no point in reporting corruption as nothing useful would be done about it.

#### Local council employee behaviour

The majority of respondents (78%) believed that most local council employees were honest and 82 per cent felt that local councils were largely free of individuals who behaved badly. However, 81 per cent agreed that there would always be some degree of corruption in local councils.

Forty-three per cent of respondents considered that more should be done about reducing council corruption and about half (46%) felt that there was only slim a chance of wrongdoing being detected in a council job. Twenty per cent believed that there would be repercussions against someone who complained about a local council employee.

Around 26 per cent felt that there was no point in reporting local council corruption as nothing useful would be done about it. However, almost two-thirds said that they were confident of a proper investigation if they were to make a complaint against a local council employee.

### Knowledge of improper behaviour

#### Public service employees

The proportion of respondents who stated that they or someone they knew had been affected by public service employee misconduct in the last five years was 11.5 per cent. Most of the behaviour believed to be improper related to customer service issues (for example, 'manner unfriendly', 'uncaring'). The next most commonly reported problems were unfair behaviour, incompetence, and lack of action. Very few respondents reported knowledge of criminal or corrupt behaviour.

#### Local council employees

The proportion of Queenslanders who stated that they or someone they knew had been affected by local council misconduct in the last five years was 10.5 per cent. As with the public service, most of the behaviour which was believed to be improper related to customer service issues (for example, 'manner unfriendly', 'uncaring'). The next most commonly reported problems were unfair behaviour, incompetence, and lack of action. Again, very few respondents reported knowledge of criminal or corrupt behaviour.

### Complaining about improper behaviour

#### Public service employees

Only about a third of those respondents who felt like complaining actually made a complaint. The most common reason reported for not complaining was the belief that 'it would not do any good'. Of those people who either made a complaint or tried to make a complaint, the majority (56%) complained to the government department itself. No-one in the sample complained directly to CJC.

There was a high level of dissatisfaction with how complaints were handled. Almost half of these people were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled and a further 19 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied'. It is likely that most of these complaints were handled by the departments themselves.

### Local council employees

Only half of those respondents who felt like complaining against a local council employee actually made a complaint. Of those people who either made a complaint or tried to make a complaint, the majority (63%) complained to the local council itself. There was a high level of dissatisfaction with how complaints were handled. Almost half of these people were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled and a further 17 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied'. Again, no-one in the sample complained directly to the CJC.

### Comparison of respondents' views on public service and local council misconduct

Overall, there was a high degree of consistency in views about public service and local council misconduct. To the extent that there were differences, respondents tended to have a more positive view of the local councils. For example:

- whereas 58 per cent of respondents felt that not enough is being done about government corruption only 43 per cent of respondents considered this to be the case in regard to local council corruption
- 65 per cent of respondents felt 'very' or 'fairly confident' that misconduct by local council employees would be properly investigated compared to 55 per cent for the public service
- respondents were also somewhat more prepared to complain about improper behaviour by local council employees than public service employees.

### Implications

- Although few respondents had experience of serious misconduct by public service or local council employees, complaints about service issues (for example, rudeness, unreasonable behaviour, uncaring manner) were relatively common. By improving customer service, government departments and local councils could substantially enhance their standing with the public.
- Councils and public sector agencies should look at developing more 'user friendly' complaint processes. At present many people who have concerns about the behaviour of local council or public sector employees fail to make a formal complaint, because of the perception that these complaints do not do any good. Complaints are a valuable source of information about the performance of any organisation. Ensuring that the public has the perception that their complaints will be received and listened to is vital for maintaining continued public confidence in an organisation.
- The high proportion of people who do complain are dissatisfied with the way their complaints are handled. This highlights the need for both public service departments and local councils to examine their complaint handling systems and policies to ensure that there is a proper and considered response to complaints.

## Background

In July 1999, AC Nielsen Market Research conducted a telephone survey of 1502 people throughout Queensland on behalf of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC). The survey was concerned primarily with measuring public confidence, knowledge and satisfaction in regard to making complaints about the police, public servants and local council employees. The survey provides benchmark measures that can be compared to future administrations of the survey to gauge changes in public perceptions of these areas over time.

This report looks at the findings concerning the public service and local councils. A separate report concerning the police is to follow.

The responses to the surveys were initially weighted for age, sex and location in order to ensure the most accurate possible representation of Queensland attitudes were obtained. However, these weighted responses were not found to differ significantly from actual responses and

consequently, the actual responses are reported in this paper. Where appropriate, table or figure headings are worded exactly as the questions were asked in the survey. For this reason, a copy of the survey has not been included in this document.<sup>1</sup>

## Structure of the report

This report is divided into five parts.

- Part A examines the general public's perceptions of public service employee behaviour, their knowledge of improper government employee behaviour and their experiences in complaining about such improper behaviour.
- Part B examines the same issues in regard to the public's perception of local council employees.
- Part C compares respondents' views on public service and local council misconduct.
- Part D presents a summary of the survey findings.
- Part E describes implications arising from the survey.

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the questionnaire can be supplied upon request.

## Part A Public service employee behaviour

### General views on behaviour

Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents who indicated agreement with various statements about the public service. The majority (75%) felt that most government employees were honest. However, most respondents (84%) also agreed that there would always be some degree of government corruption. Fifty-eight per cent considered that more should be done about reducing government corruption and about half felt that there was only a slim chance of wrongdoing being detected in a government job. About 28 per cent felt that there was no point in reporting corruption as nothing useful would be done about it.

Table 1 — Respondents' perceptions of the public service

	Respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'	
	No.	%
Most government employees are honest	1131	75.3
You will always get some corruption in the public service	1268	84.4
Not enough is being done about government corruption	866	57.7
The chances of getting caught doing something corrupt in a government job are slim	747	49.7
There is no point in reporting corruption in the Queensland public service because nothing useful will be done about it	425	28.3

Note: The question was asked on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) and included a 'don't know' option.

Table 2 shows that most respondents (78%) believed that the public service was largely free of individuals who behaved badly. Only around 2 per cent thought that most government employees behaved badly.

Table 2 — The perceived behaviour of members of the public service

	No.	%
Generally behave well	461	30.7
Most behave well, a minority badly	711	47.3
Roughly equal numbers good and bad	271	18.0
Most behave badly, a minority well	29	1.9
Generally behave badly	8	0.5
Don't know	22	1.5
Total	1502	100

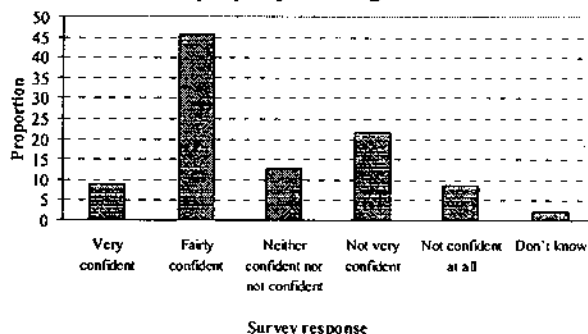
Table 3 reveals that the majority of respondents (58%) felt that public service employee behaviour had remained unchanged over the last few years. The proportion who believed it had changed for the better was higher than the proportion who believed it had changed for the worse.

Table 3 — Over the last few years do you think public service employee behaviour in Queensland has ...

	No.	%
Changed for the worse	217	14.4
Stayed about the same	867	57.7
Changed for the better	314	20.9
Don't know	104	6.9
Total	1502	100.0

Figure 1 shows that about 55 per cent of respondents were 'very' or 'fairly' confident that complaints against a public service employee would be properly investigated, about 30 per cent said that they were 'not very confident' or 'not confident at all' and the balance were undecided.

Figure 1 — If you were to make a complaint how confident would you be that your complaint would be properly investigated?



Note: n=1442. The 60 respondents (48 from within the last five years) who made or tried to make a complaint were not required to answer this question.



## Knowledge of improper behaviour

Table 4 shows the proportion of the population who report having been affected by public service employee misconduct. The proportion of Queenslanders who stated that they had ever been affected by public service employee misconduct was 14 per cent. The majority of these respondents (54%) stated that they had been affected by government employee misconduct in the last 12 months with a further 31 per cent indicating that the alleged misconduct had occurred between one and five years ago (table 5).

**Table 4 — Has a Queensland government employee ever behaved improperly in a way which affected you or someone you know?**

	No.	%
Yes	204	13.6
No	1298	86.4
Total	1502	100

**Table 5 — When was the last time this happened?**

	No.	% experiencing improper behaviour	% of total sample
In the last 12 months	110	54.2	7.3
One to two years ago	31	15.3	2.1
Two to five years ago	32	15.8	2.1
More than five years ago	30	14.8	2.0
Total	203	100	13.5

Note: One respondent did not answer this question.

## Forms of improper behaviour

The data presented in tables 6 and 7 are drawn from the 173 respondents (11.5% of the total sample) who indicated that they had encountered public service employee misconduct within the last five years. Of these 173 respondents, 94 (54.3%) indicated the improper behaviour was directed at themselves, 61 (35.3%) indicated it was directed at someone else, and 18 (10.4%) indicated it was directed at both themselves and someone else.

Table 6 (below) shows how respondents described the government employee behaviour that they saw as improper. Most of the behaviour which was believed to be improper related to customer service issues (for example, 'manner unfriendly', 'uncaring'). The next most commonly reported problems were unfair behaviour, incompetence, and lack of action. Very few respondents reported illegal behaviour.

**Table 6 — What was it that was improper?**

	No.	% experiencing improper behaviour	% of total sample
Manner unfriendly/rude/arrogant/over-casual etc.	118	68.2	7.9
Uncaring	56	32.4	3.7
Behaved unreasonably or unfairly	63	36.4	4.2
Did wrong thing/were incompetent	36	20.8	2.4
Did nothing/didn't do enough	33	19.1	2.2
Did not keep person informed/did not come back	6	3.5	0.4
Slow to arrive/did not come when sent for/no-one available	7	4.0	0.5
Racist language or behaviour	6	3.5	0.4
Behaved illegally/broke the rules	8	4.6	0.5
Favouritism	7	4.0	0.5
Used undue force or violence, or assaulted someone	4	2.3	0.3
Released confidential information	4	2.3	0.3
Misused public money or resources	3	1.7	0.2
Cheated on the system	3	1.7	0.2
Failed to declare a conflict of interest	1	0.6	0.1
Other reason	22	12.7	1.5

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed. The data in the table relate to behaviour which respondents reported occurring in the last five years.

## Action taken in response to improper behaviour

Table 7 shows that the majority of those who had experienced what they believed to be improper behaviour 'felt like' making an official complaint. However, table 8 shows that only about one-third of those 119 respondents who felt like complaining actually proceeded to make an official complaint.

**Table 7 — Did you feel like making an official complaint to someone about the way this government employee behaved on this occasion?**

	No.	%
Yes	119	68.8
No	54	31.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 8 — Did you actually make, or try to make, an official complaint?<sup>2</sup>**

	No.	%
Yes – made a complaint	45	37.8
Tried to, but failed to make a complaint	3	2.5
No	71	59.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 9 shows the reasons given for not complaining by those 71 respondents who felt like making a complaint but did not. The most common reason reported for not complaining was the belief that 'it would not do any good'.

**Table 9 — What was the reason you didn't make an official complaint?**

	No.	%
It would not do any good	31	43.7
It would be too much trouble	17	23.9
It was not serious enough	10	14.1
Worried about repercussions /fearful of retaliation	7	9.9
Did not know how to make complaint	7	9.9
You would not be believed	3	4.2
Not my problem/situation didn't involve me	2	2.8
Some other reason	12	16.9

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed.

Of those people who either made a complaint or tried to make a complaint, the majority (56%) complained to the government department itself (table 10). No-one complained directly to the CJC.

**Table 10 — Who did you make or attempt to make your complaint to?**

	No.	%
The government department itself	27	56.3
MP/Local member	6	12.5
Ombudsman	4	8.3
Other	18	37.5

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed.

Figure 2 shows the levels of satisfaction among those who had made a complaint. Almost half of these people were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled and a further 19 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied'. Only 25 per cent declared that they were 'fairly' or 'very satisfied' with the handling of the matter. Given that most complaints related to relatively minor infractions (such as rudeness or perceived lack of fairness) it is likely that most of these matters were handled by the departments themselves rather than an external body such as the CJC.

**Figure 2 — Overall, how satisfied were you with the way your complaint was handled?**



Note: n=48.

2 It should be noted that in general it was not the same respondents who complained (or tried to) about both public service and local council employee behaviour. Only five respondents complained about both public service and local council employee behaviour.

## Part B: Local council employee behaviour

### General views on behaviour

Table 11 shows the proportion of respondents who indicated agreement with various statements about local councils. The majority of respondents (78%) felt that most local council employees were honest, although most (81%) believed that there would always be some degree of corruption in local councils.

Forty-three per cent believed not enough was being done about reducing council corruption and about half of the respondents (46%) felt that there was only a slim chance of wrongdoing being detected in a council job. Around 26 per cent felt that there was no point in reporting local council corruption as nothing useful would be done about it and 20 per cent believed that there would be repercussions against someone who complained about a local council employee.

Table 11 — Respondents' perceptions of local councils

	Respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'	
	No.	%
Most council employees are honest	1176	78.3
People who complain against council employees are likely to suffer for it	295	19.6
You will always get some corruption in local councils	1222	81.4
Not enough is being done about council corruption	647	43.1
The chances of getting caught doing something corrupt in a council job are slim	695	46.3
There is no point in reporting corruption in Queensland local councils because nothing useful will be done about it	385	25.6

Note: The question was asked on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) and included a 'don't know' option.

Table 12 shows that most respondents (82%) believed that local councils were largely free of individuals who behaved badly. Only 2 per cent thought that most council employees behaved badly.<sup>3</sup>

Table 12 — The perceived behaviour of members of local councils

	No.	%
Generally well	583	38.8
Most behave well, a minority behave badly	652	43.4
Roughly equal numbers good and bad	224	14.9
Most behave badly, a minority behave well	21	1.4
Generally behave badly	7	0.5
Don't know	15	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1502</b>	<b>100</b>

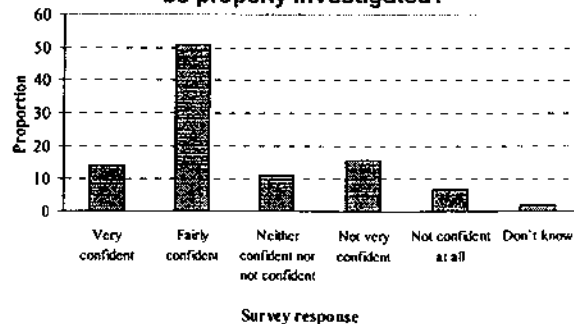
Table 13 indicates that the majority of respondents (65%) felt that local council employee behaviour had remained unchanged over the last few years. Twenty-three per cent believed that it had changed for the better and only 7 per cent believed it had changed for the worse.

Table 13 — Over the last few years do you think council employee behaviour has ...

	No.	%
Changed for the worse	107	7.1
Stayed about the same	983	65.4
Changed for the better	346	23.0
Don't know	66	4.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1502</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 3 shows how confident people were that complaints against a local council employee would be properly investigated. About 65 per cent were confident of a proper investigation.

Figure 3 — If you were to make a complaint how confident would you be that your complaint would be properly investigated?



Note: n=1436. The 66 respondents (54 from within the last five years) who made or tried to make a complaint were not required to answer this question.

3 While the question used the word 'members' it is unlikely that respondents distinguished between local government elected members and other council employees.

## Knowledge of improper behaviour

Table 14 shows the proportion of the population who report having been affected by local council employee misconduct. The proportion of Queenslanders who stated that they had been affected by such misconduct was 12 per cent. The majority of these respondents (56%) stated that they had been affected by local council employee misconduct in the last 12 months with a further 29 per cent indicating that the misconduct had occurred between one and five years ago (table 15).

**Table 14 — Has a council employee ever behaved improperly in a way which affected you or someone you know?**

	No.	%
Yes	186	12.4
No	1316	87.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1502</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 15 — When was the last time this happened?**

	No.	% experiencing improper behaviour	% of total sample
In the last 12 months	103	55.7	6.9
One to two years ago	23	12.4	1.5
Two to five years ago	31	16.8	2.1
More than five years ago	28	15.1	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12.4</b>

Note: One respondent did not answer this question.

## Forms of improper behaviour

The data presented in tables 16 and 17 are drawn from the 157 respondents (10.5% of the total sample) who indicated that they had encountered local council employee misconduct within the last five years. Of these 157 respondents, 84 (53.5%) indicated the improper behaviour was directed at themselves, 56 (35.7%) indicated it was directed at someone else, and 17 (10.8%) that it was directed at both themselves and someone else.

Table 16 (below) shows how respondents described the local council employee behaviour that they saw as improper. As with the public service, most of the behaviour which was believed to be improper related to customer service issues (for example, 'manner unfriendly', 'uncaring'). The next most commonly reported problems were unfair behaviour, incompetence, and lack of action. Again, very few respondents reported illegal behaviour.

## Action taken in response to improper behaviour

The majority of those who experienced what they believed to be improper behaviour 'felt like' making an official complaint (table 17). However, table 18 shows that only half of those 102 respondents who felt like complaining actually proceeded to make an official complaint.

**Table 16 — What was it that was improper?**

	No.	% experiencing improper behaviour	% of total sample
Manner unfriendly/rude/arrogant/over-casual etc.	81	51.6	5.4
Uncaring	35	22.3	2.3
Behaved unreasonably or unfairly	55	35.0	3.7
Did wrong thing/were incompetent	29	18.5	1.9
Did nothing/didn't do enough	28	17.8	1.9
Did not keep person informed/did not come back	7	4.5	0.5
Slow to arrive/did not come when sent for/no-one available	2	1.3	0.1
Racist language or behaviour	3	1.9	0.2
Behaved illegally/broke the rules	7	4.5	0.5
Favouritism	8	5.1	0.5
Used undue force or violence, or assaulted someone	2	1.3	0.1
Released confidential information	1	0.6	0.1
Misused public money or resources	3	1.9	0.2
Cheated on the system	3	1.9	0.2
Failed to declare a conflict of interest	1	0.6	0.1
Took a bribe	1	0.6	0.1
Stole money or goods	1	0.6	0.1
Other reason	29	18.5	1.9

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed. Table relates to behaviour which respondents reported occurring in the last five years.

Table 17 — Did you feel like making an official complaint to someone about the way this council employee behaved on this occasion?

	No.	%
Yes	102	65.0
No	55	35.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 18 — Did you actually make, or try to make, an official complaint?

	No.	%
Yes — made a complaint	51	50.0
Tried to, but failed to make a complaint	3	2.9
No	48	47.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 19 shows the reasons given by those 48 respondents who felt like making a complaint but did not. The most common reason reported for not complaining was the belief that 'it would not do any good'.

Table 19 — What was the reason you didn't make an official complaint?

	No.	%
It would not do any good	19	39.6
It would be too much trouble	9	18.8
It was not serious enough	8	16.7
Worried about repercussions/fearful of retaliation	7	14.6
Did not know how to make complaint	4	8.3
You would not be believed	1	2.1
Not my problem/situation didn't involve me	2	4.2
Some other reason	7	14.6

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed.

Table 20 shows that, of those people who either made a complaint or tried to make a complaint, the majority (63%) complained to the local council itself. Again, it is worth noting that no-one complained directly to the CJC.

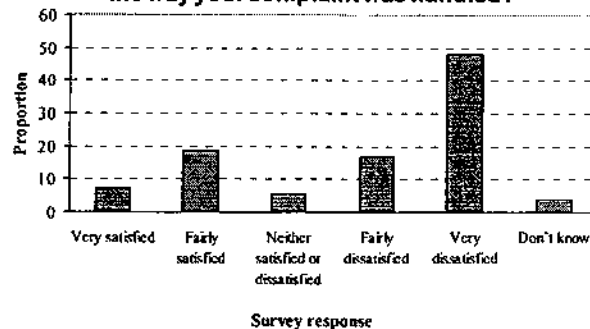
Table 20 — Who did you make or attempt to make your complaint to?

	No.	%
The local council itself	34	63.0
MP/Local member	5	9.3
Ombudsman	3	5.6
Police	1	1.9
Other	16	29.6

Note: The percentages for this question add to over 100% as multiple responses were allowed.

Figure 4 shows that of those people who made a complaint, almost half were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled and a further 17 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied'. As with complaints relating to public service employees, it is likely that most of these matters would have been handled internally rather than externally.

Figure 4 — Overall, how satisfied were you with the way your complaint was handled?



Note: n=54.

## Part C: A comparison

Overall, there was a high degree of consistency in views about public service and local council misconduct. The main differences were:

- Whereas 58 per cent of respondents felt that not enough is being done about government corruption only 43 per cent of respondents considered this to be the case in regards to local council corruption (see tables 1 and 11). Fewer people also thought that local council employee behaviour had changed for the worse (7% compared to 14% for public service employee behaviour — see tables 3 and 13).
- Sixty-five per cent of respondents felt 'very' or 'fairly' confident that misconduct by local council employees would be properly investigated compared to 55 per cent for the public service (see figures 1 and 3).
- Only 40 per cent of those experiencing public service employee misconduct complained (or tried to) compared to 53 per cent in regards to local councils (see tables 8 and 18). Fewer people complained to the government department itself (56%) than complained to the local council itself (63%) (see tables 10 and 20).

## Part D: Summary

The main points revealed by the survey were:

- The majority of respondents felt that most government and local council employees were honest and that the public service and local councils were largely free of individuals who behaved badly. However, most respondents also believed that there would always be some degree of government and local council corruption.
- The majority of respondents disagreed with the statements 'There is no point in reporting corruption in the Queensland Public Service because nothing useful will be done about it' and 'There is no point in reporting corruption in Local Councils because nothing useful will be done about it'. However, about half of the respondents felt that there was only a slim chance of wrongdoing being detected in either a government or local council job.
- While the majority of respondents felt that public service and local council employee behaviour had remained unchanged over the last few years, respondents were more likely to agree that employee behaviour in these two sectors had changed for the better rather than the worse.
- The great majority of respondents were not aware of public service or local council employees behaving improperly. Most of the behaviour in regards to both the public service and local councils which was believed to be improper related to customer service issues (for example, 'manner unfriendly', 'uncaring'). Very few respondents claimed to have knowledge of illegal behaviour in either sector.
- About 55 per cent of respondents were confident of a proper investigation into public service employee misconduct. A slightly greater proportion (65%) were confident of a proper investigation into local council employee misconduct.
- Only about one-third of those respondents who felt like complaining actually proceeded to make a complaint in regards to public service employee misconduct and about half in regards to local council employee misconduct. The most common reason reported for not complaining against public service and local council employees was the belief that 'it would not do any good'.
- Of those respondents who made complaints against public service and local council employees, almost half were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled. A further 19 per cent in regards to public service complaints and 17 per cent in regards to local council complaints were 'fairly dissatisfied'.

## Part E: Implications

- Although few respondents had experience of serious misconduct by public service or local council employees, complaints about service issues (for example, rudeness, unreasonable behaviour, uncaring manner) were relatively common. By improving customer service, government departments and local councils could substantially enhance their standing with the public.
- The low rate of complaints among those people perceiving improper behaviour on the part of public service or local council employees is a matter of some concern. Only about one-third of those respondents who felt like complaining actually proceeded to make a complaint in regard to public service employees and only half of those respondents who felt like complaining actually proceeded to make a complaint in regard to local council employees. Councils and public sector agencies should look at developing more 'user friendly' complaint processes. At present many people who have concerns about the behaviour of local council or public sector employees fail to make a formal complaint because of the perception that these complaints do not do any good. Complaints are a valuable source of information about the performance of any organisation. Ensuring that the public has the perception that their complaints will be received and listened to is vital for maintaining continued public confidence in an organisation.
- Almost half of those respondents who made complaints against public service and local council employees were 'very dissatisfied' with the way the complaint was handled. A further 19 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied' in regard to public service complaints and 17 per cent in regard to local council complaints. These findings highlight the need for public service departments and local councils to examine their complaint-handling systems and policies to ensure that there is a proper and considered response to complaints.

