

Information Rights Tracker Survey – Key Wave 13 results

Fieldwork: April 2009

25 June 2009

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Wave 13 fieldwork

9-15 April 2009. Sample: 1,853 adults aged 15 and over in England and Wales.

Previous waves

Wave 1 – Jun 2005
Wave 2 – Sep 2005
Wave 3 – Dec 2005
Wave 4 – Mar 2006
Wave 5 – Jul 2006
Wave 6 – Mar 2007
Wave 7 – Jul 2007
Wave 8 – Nov 2007
Wave 9 – Mar 2008
Wave 10 – Jun 2008
Wave 11 – Oct 2008
Wave 12 – Jan 2009

Important note

The fieldwork for this survey was carried out by the British Market Research Bureau. BMRB also did the fieldwork up to and including the Wave 5 survey, while waves 6 to 9 were carried out by Ipsos-MORI. Although the survey methodology (face-to-face Omnibus) and the question and answer wordings have been retained unchanged as far as possible, there will inevitably be differences in approach (e.g. sampling frames, interviewer coding practices, etc.) between the two contractors. Comparisons between the results for waves where different contractors were used should therefore be drawn with caution, bearing these differences in mind. Thin lines on the time series charts indicate where there has been a change of contractor.

Executive summary: main messages from the tracker survey

The tracker survey results show that:

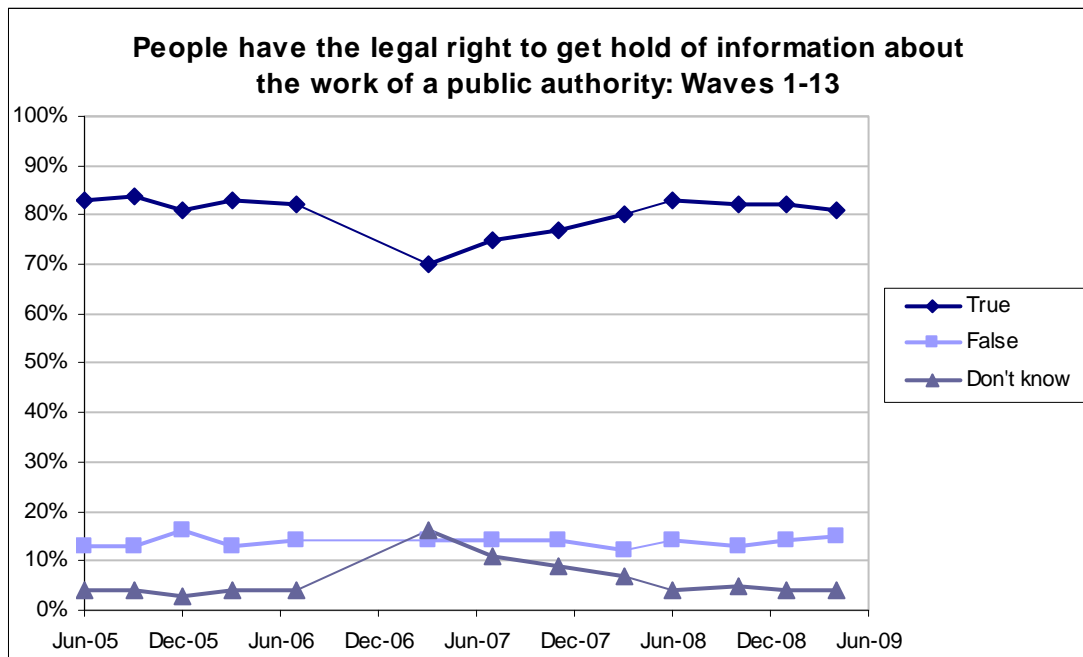
- The majority of respondents are aware of their right to access information under the Freedom of Information and Data Protection acts, although more respondents are aware of the latter than the former.
- Respondents tend to disagree that public authorities are open and trustworthy (although much less so in the last few waves than earlier in the series), but tend to agree that public authorities are becoming more open. The majority of respondents think that public authorities can be held to account because of the right to get information from them.
- Respondents are generally comfortable about giving personal information to businesses and public authorities (more so to the latter than the former). Responses have been relatively consistent in recent waves, suggesting that media reports of data losses by public and private sector organisations have not had a marked effect on public opinion on this issue.
- In recent waves just under 40% of all respondents cannot name a specific piece of legislation under which rights of access to information are granted (although the proportion was higher than this in previous waves). Respondents aged under 25 and over 65 were more likely than others to be unable to name a piece of legislation. Between a quarter and a third of respondents can name either the Data Protection Act or the Freedom of Information Act or both.

1. Factual awareness of information rights

"People have the legal right to get hold of information about the work of a public authority"

W13

- True: **81%**
- False: **15%**
- Don't know: **4%**



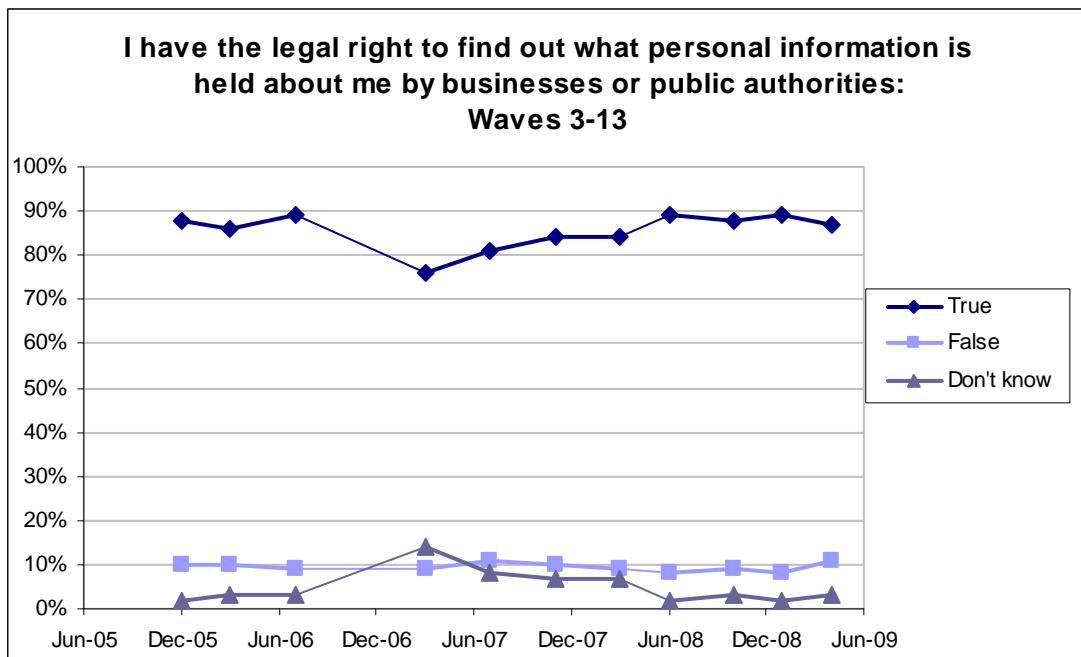
- The vast majority of respondents are aware of their rights to obtain information from public authorities.
- The proportion of people answering “true” has been flat over the last few waves, following a steady increase in the preceding waves. Overall this suggests that awareness of rights to obtain information from public authorities has been increasing over the last couple of years. However the proportion was lowest during waves 6-9 when a different contractor carried out the survey. Therefore some of the trends shown may be partly driven by differences in approach taken by the contractors, rather than a genuine dip then recovery in public awareness about information rights.

- The proportion of respondents who incorrectly thought that this statement is “false” has stayed steady throughout at about 13% or 14% (about 1 in 7 people).
- Levels of awareness have been: (i) highest among adults in the main working age population (ages 25-64) and lowest among adults aged 24 and under, (ii) higher among respondents in social classes AB and C1 than those in social classes C2 and DE. Nevertheless, levels of awareness were high among all these demographic groups.

"I have the legal right to find out what personal information is held about me by businesses or public authorities"

W13

- True: **87%**
- False: **11%**
- Don't know: **3%**



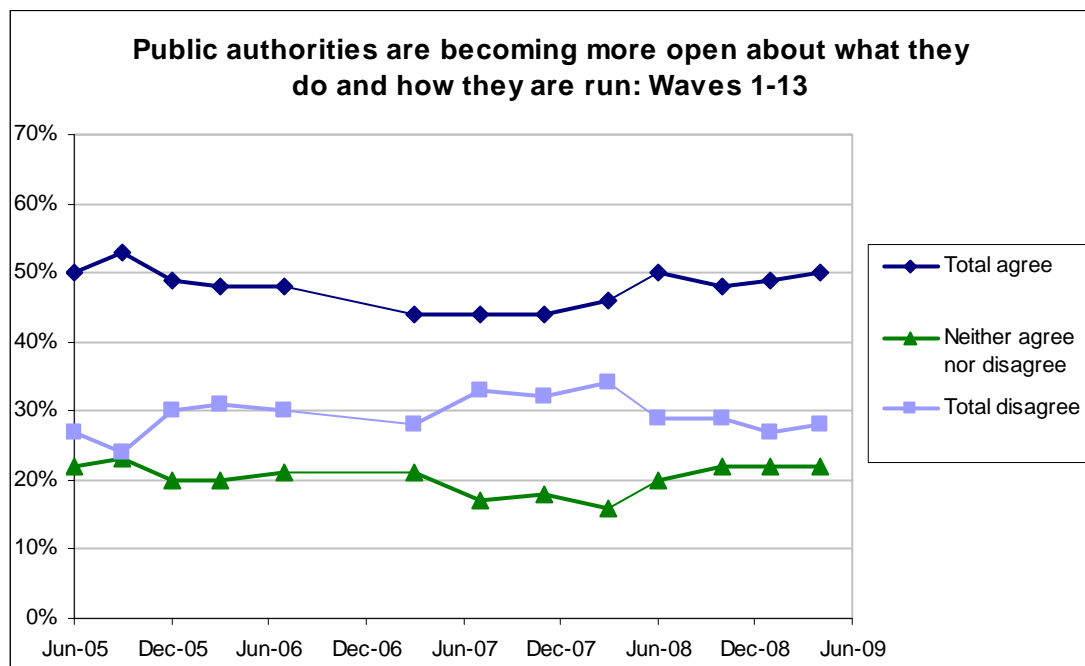
- The vast majority of respondents are aware of their rights to obtain personal information from public authorities and businesses.
- Trends have closely mirrored those for the previous question. Similarly, the trends shown may be partly driven by differences in approach taken by the contractors, rather than genuine trends in public awareness about their rights to obtain their personal information.
- Demographic patterns have also closely matched those for awareness of FoI rights above, i.e. awareness was high among all subgroups, but higher among respondents in the working age population and in social classes AB and C1.

2. Attitudes to information rights issues – Freedom of Information

“Public authorities are becoming more open about what they do and how they are run”

W13

- Agree strongly: **16%**
- Agree slightly: **34%**
- Neither agree nor disagree: **22%**
- Disagree slightly: **15%**
- Disagree strongly: **13%**
- Don't know: **1%**

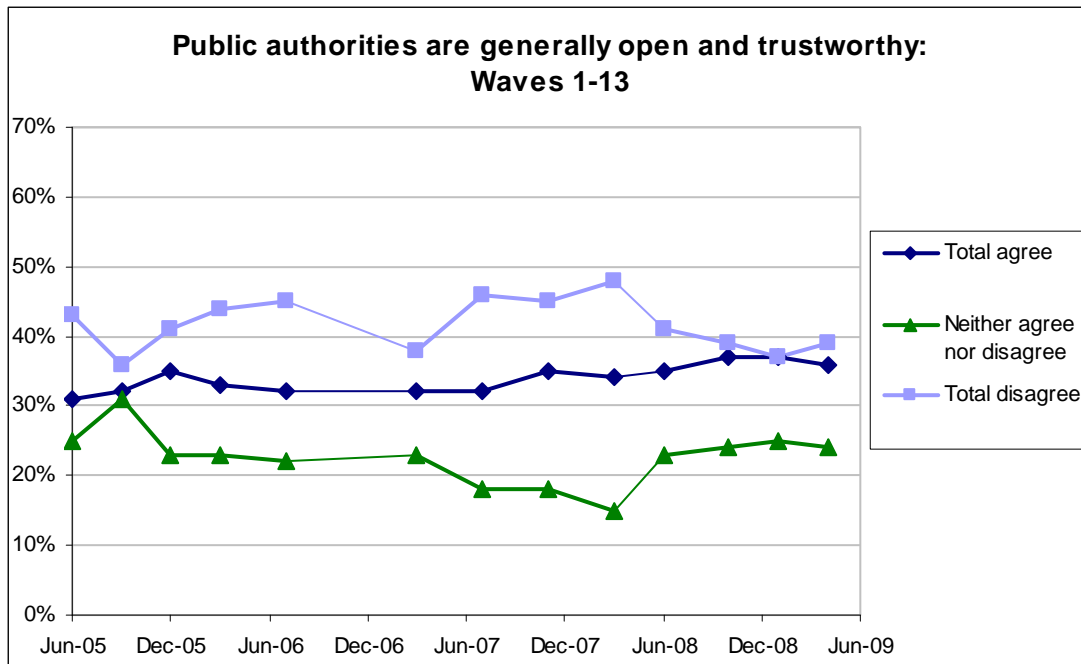


- Consistently since the tracker survey began, more respondents agree than disagree that public authorities are becoming more open.
- Between waves 2 and 9 (Sep 2005 and Mar 2008) the gap between the proportions agreeing and disagreeing narrowed, but has widened again in the most recent few waves.

“Public authorities are generally open and trustworthy”

W13

- Agree strongly: **10%**
- Agree slightly: **26%**
- Neither agree nor disagree: **24%**
- Disagree slightly: **21%**
- Disagree strongly: **18%**
- Don't know: **0%**



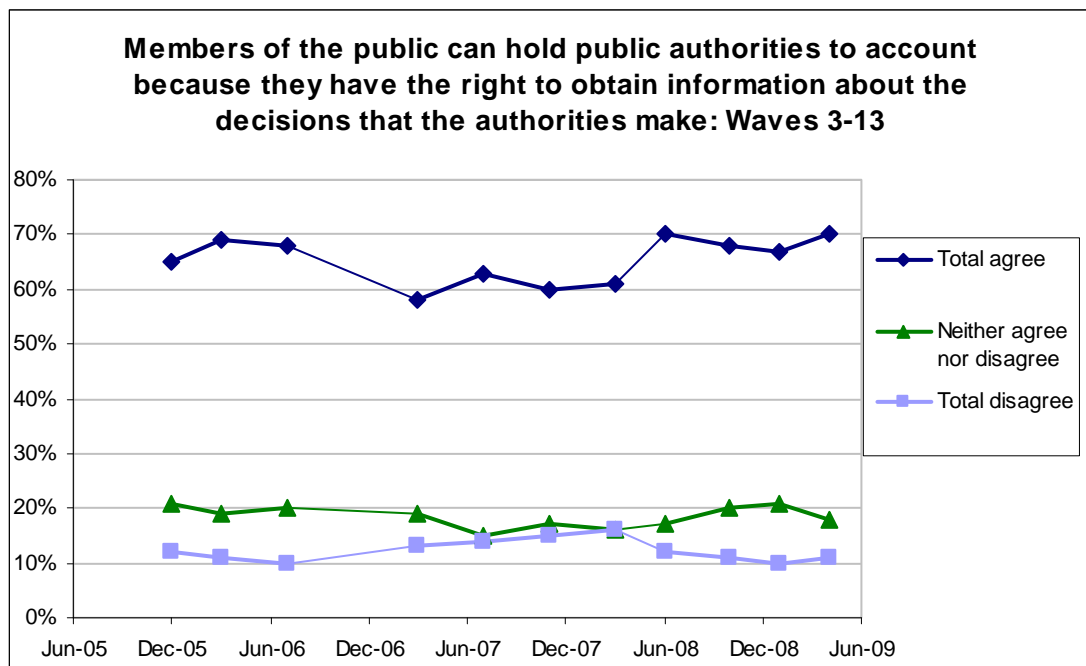
- In each wave since the tracker survey began, about a third of respondents have agreed (either strongly or slightly) that public authorities are generally open and trustworthy.
- Although the proportion disagreeing has been more volatile, over past waves consistently more respondents have disagreed than agreed. However, the gap has been much narrower in the most recent three or more waves. In the previous wave slightly more respondents agreed than disagreed.
- Over all the waves to date, belief in public authorities’ openness and trustworthiness has been much higher among: (i) younger adults aged under 35 than those in older age groups, (ii) BME respondents than White respondents.

“Members of the public can hold public authorities to account because they have the right to obtain information about the decisions that the authorities make”

W13

- Agree strongly: 35%
- Agree slightly: 34%
- Neither agree nor disagree : 18%
- Disagree slightly: 7%
- Disagree strongly: 3%
- Don't know: 2%

(New question at Wave 3.)



- A strong majority of respondents agree (either strongly or slightly) that public authorities can be held to account due to the right to obtain information from them. The proportion so doing has shown some volatility (possibly partly a result of the contractor changes), and has not shown any clear definitive trend.
- The proportions of respondents disagreeing or neither agreeing nor disagreeing has also shown some variation but on the whole have remained relatively stable with no obvious long-term trend.
- Despite having a higher level of trust in public authorities' openness and trustworthiness than older adults, younger adults (aged under 35) had a lower level of agreement that access to information enables public authorities to be held to account (although the majority of them did still agree).

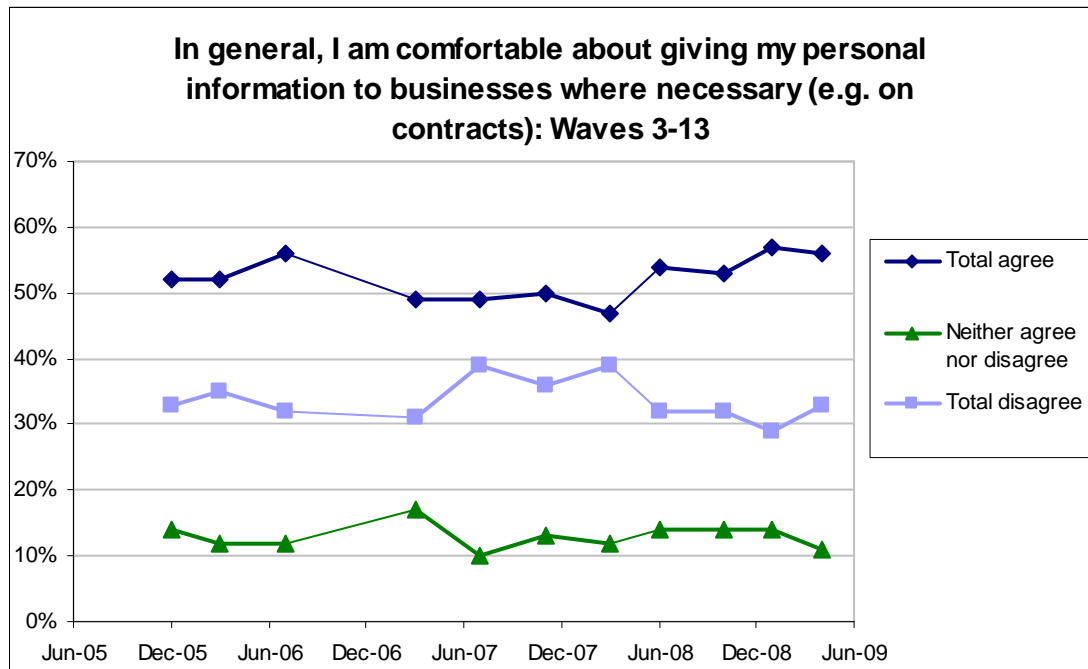
3. Attitudes to information rights issues – Data Protection

“In general, I am comfortable about giving my personal information to businesses where necessary (e.g. on contracts)”

W13

- Agree strongly: **19%**
- Agree slightly: **38%**
- Neither agree nor disagree: **11%**
- Disagree slightly: **19%**
- Disagree strongly: **14%**
- Don't know: **0%**

(New question at Wave 3.)

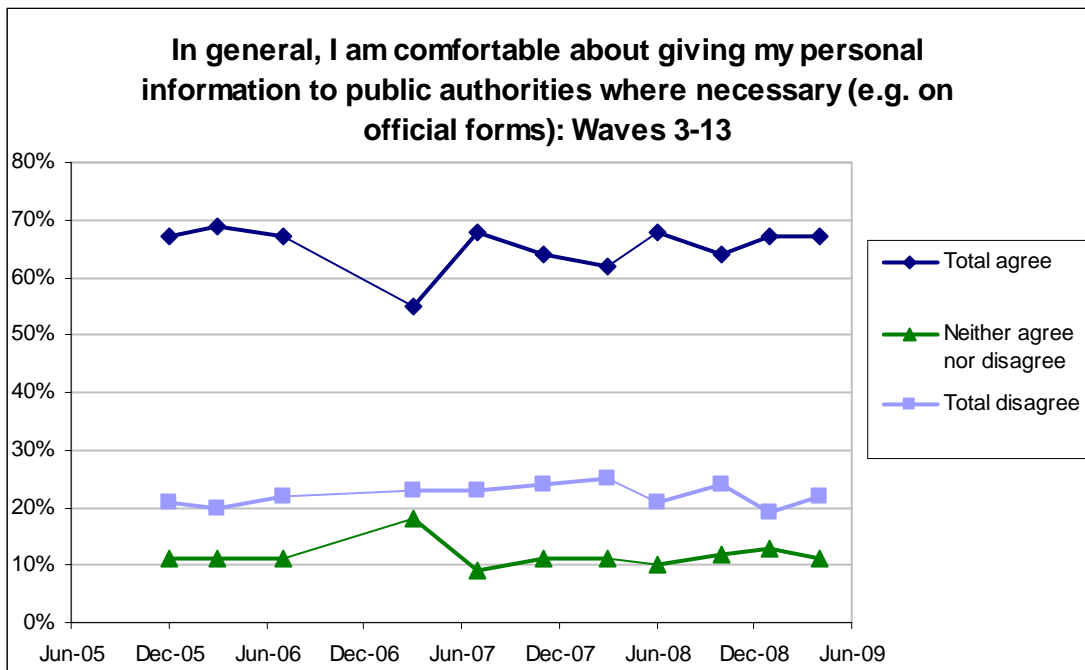


“In general, I am comfortable about giving my personal information to public authorities where necessary (e.g. on official forms)”

W13

- Agree strongly: **31%**
- Agree slightly: **37%**
- Neither agree nor disagree: **11%**
- Disagree slightly: **13%**
- Disagree strongly: **9%**
- Don't know: **0%**

(New question at Wave 3.)



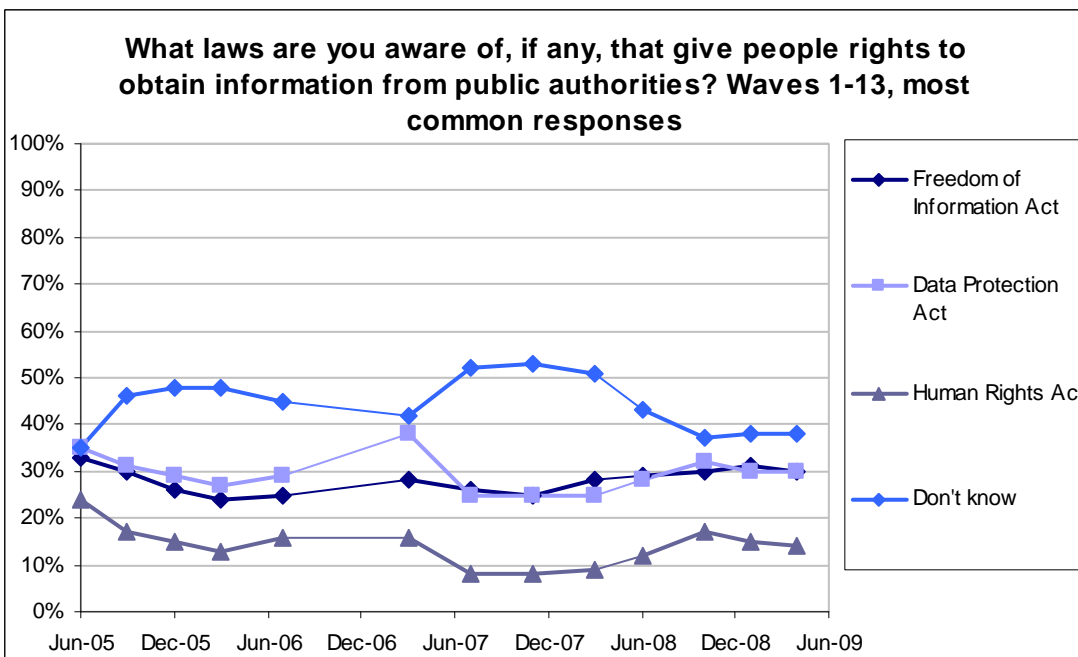
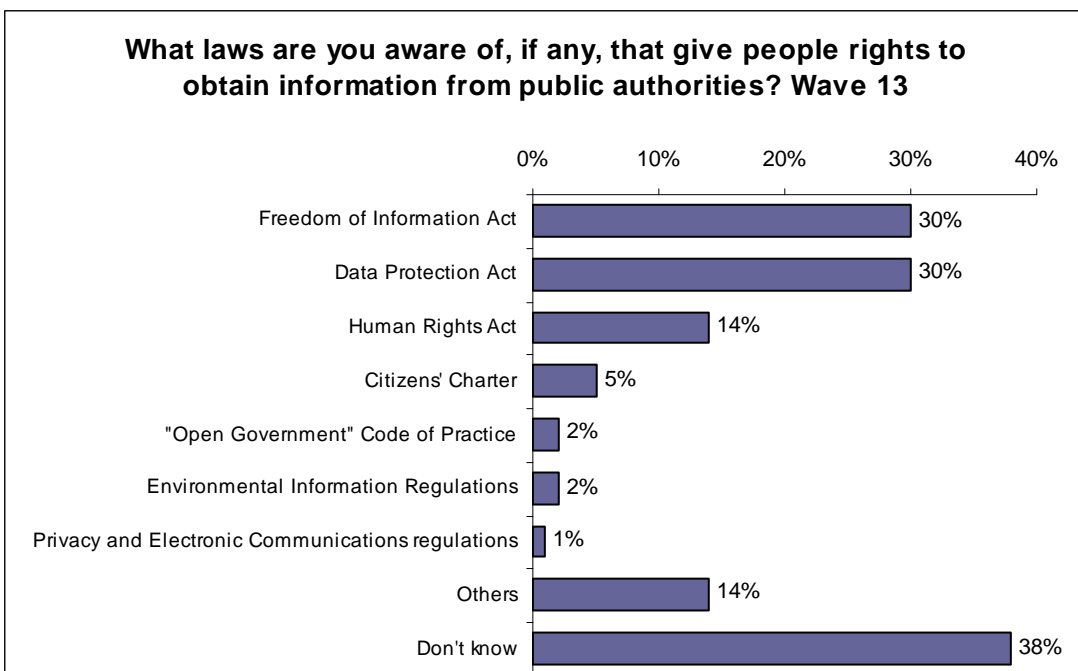
- The survey responses have consistently indicated a higher level of trust in the handling of personal information by public authorities than by businesses.

- The last five waves have taken place since the reports of public and private sector organisations losing personal information (the most high-profile, the loss of discs containing personal information of child benefit claimants by HMRC, was announced only mid-way through the fieldwork for wave 8). Although the change of contractor may affect trends, certainly the results do not indicate that these events have had a significant effect on public trust in data handling by organisations.
- Levels of trust in the handling of personal data, by both businesses and public authorities, seem to be highest among younger adults and generally decrease with age.

4. Awareness of information rights legislation

What laws are you aware of, if any, that give people rights to obtain information from public authorities?

(Unprompted question; all applicable answers coded, so respondents could mention more than one item on the list)



- Over the waves to date, consistently between a quarter and a third of respondents have been able to name the Data Protection Act (DPA) and/or the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) as a piece of information rights legislation.
- The most common response has, however, been “don’t know”, with typically 40%-50% of respondents being unable to name a single piece of legislation. This proportion has been slightly below 40% in the most recent few waves.
- A much greater proportion of younger adults (under 25) and older adults (65 and over) were unable to name any relevant item than respondents in the intermediate age groups. The FOIA and DPA were named by a much greater proportion of respondents in social class AB and C1 than in C2 and DE. These two demographic trends reflect the results of the questions in the first section of this report regarding knowledge of data protection and information rights.