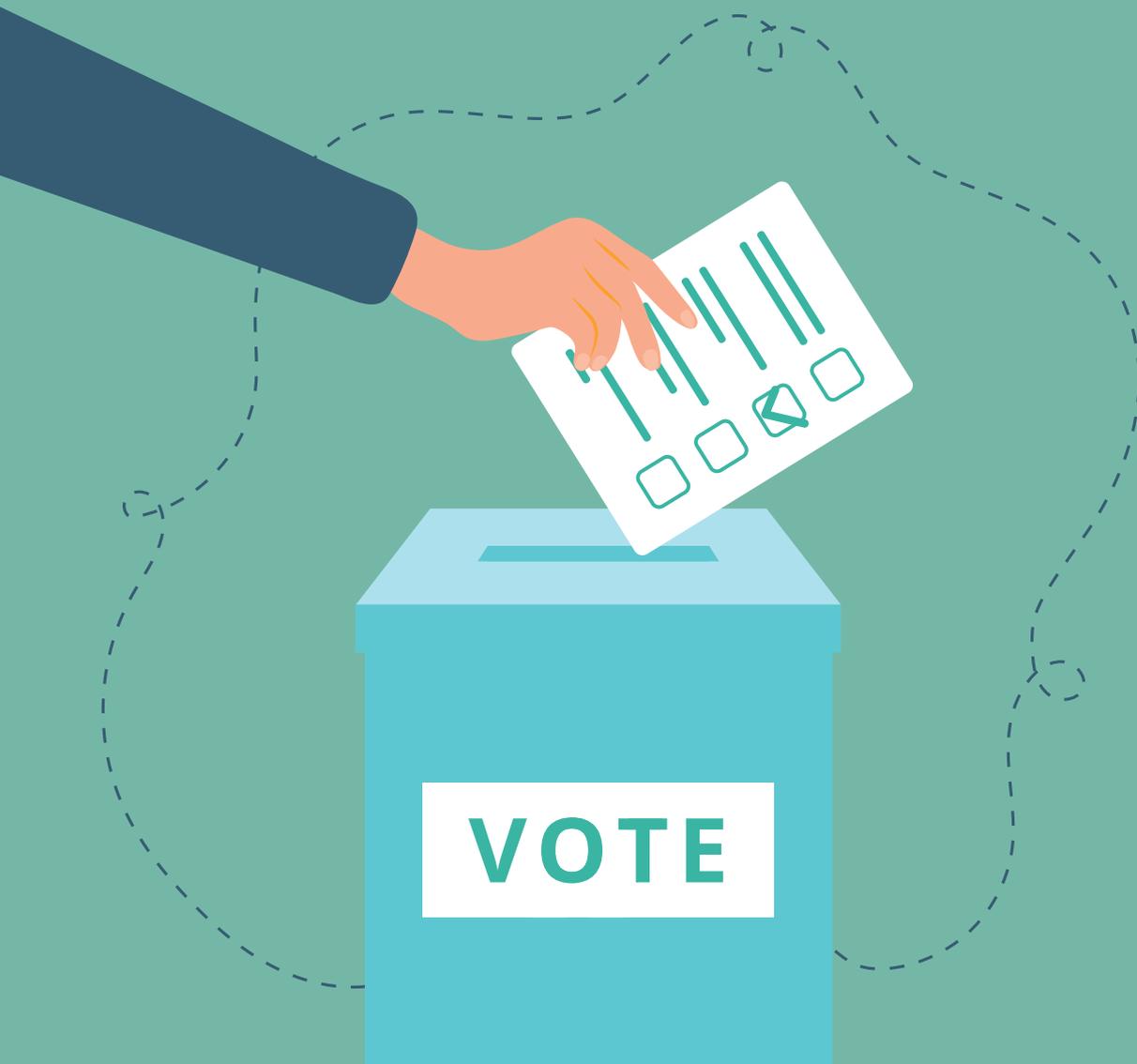




May 2022: Local Elections Report

Unpacking the May 2022 Local Elections results



At a glance

Laura Cunliffe-Hall

The May 2022 Local Elections saw parts of the country take to the polls, returning 74 Labour Councils, 35 Conservative Councils, 16 Liberal Democrat Councils, 66 Councils under No Overall Control (NOC) and 9 Councils split between Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Independent Party and Aspire.

The 2021 Local Elections vaccine bounce was not replicated this year for the Conservatives – as the lingering cost of living crisis, ‘partygate’ and energy security fears provided a background of uncertainty and increased the pressure on the party. While a Conservative decline in votes across London was expected, it suffered big losses in typical ‘Tory heartlands’ in the Home Counties.

While Labour has tightened its hold over London and secured historic victories in wresting Westminster and Wandsworth from Conservative control, it is yet to make up enough ground across the Midlands where traditional marginal seats are fought. Despite gains elsewhere for Labour, they were not enough to win back areas lost back in 2005 and 2010, like Nuneaton and Peterborough. Nevertheless, other highlights for Labour included winning back control of Southampton council having lost it to the Tories in 2021, and gaining the new Cumberland Council, which covers the area represented by three Conservative MPs in the so-called ‘Red Wall’ (Carlisle, Copeland, and Workington).

On the other hand, the Conservatives are under threat from the Liberal Democrats and the Greens in their traditional heartlands, potentially looking to impact their Parliamentary majority in the longer term. However, the Conservatives will also be heartened by the Party’s performance across the Midlands and the North.

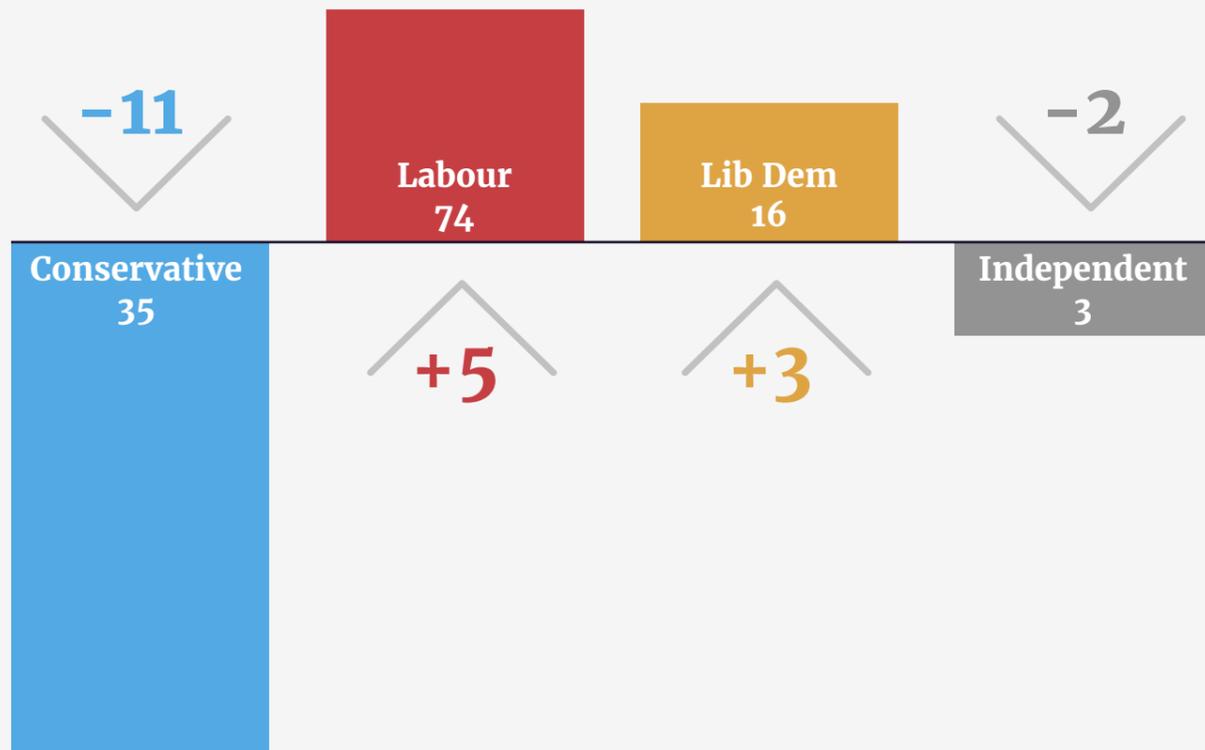
A complicated set of local elections results means that all parties have been able to interpret the data to serve their own political messaging. Yet the fact that overall, almost 500 Conservative councillors lost their seats, offset by minimal gains in England, fewer than any of the other significant parties indicates that the political tide, for so long predominantly blue, is once again beginning to turn.

The Liberal Democrats have taken Hull and the newly-created Somerset unitary authority after a strong showing, gaining more than 100 councillors in England, highlighting a long-awaited resurgence for the party since the Coalition era. The Greens also made over 80 gains in areas including South Tyneside, Cumberland, Oxford and Worcester.

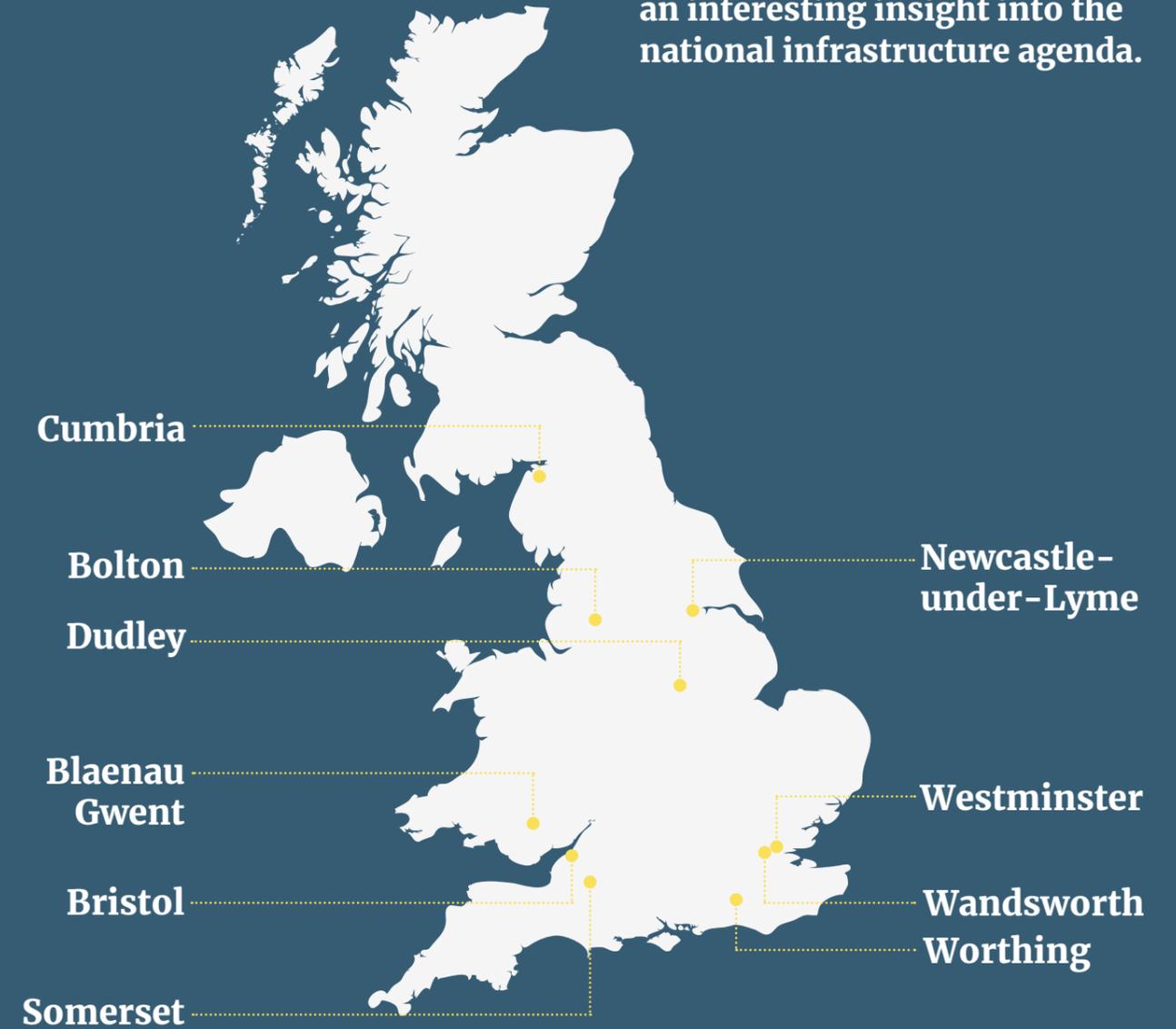
Moving into Scotland, the SNP retained their domination with the largest number of councillors, however Labour made significant gains and the Conservatives lost 63 councillors. In Wales, whilst Plaid Cymru took control of three councils, Mark Drakeford’s Labour took control of Blaenau Gwent and Bridgend but lost Neath Port Talbot winning control of eight councils overall. About 2.2 million people were allowed to take part, including 16 and 17-year-olds for the first time in a local election. It was another bad night for the Conservatives in Wales, as they lost the only council they controlled in Wales, Monmouthshire. And in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin secured the most seats in the assembly election, a first for a nationalist party in Northern Ireland.

In this report, we explore the key battles that highlight a widespread reflection of policy and geography complexities that influenced voters in these May 2022 Local Elections.

Council elections



At Copper, we have picked 10 election results that we think tell a wider story and provide an interesting insight into the national infrastructure agenda.



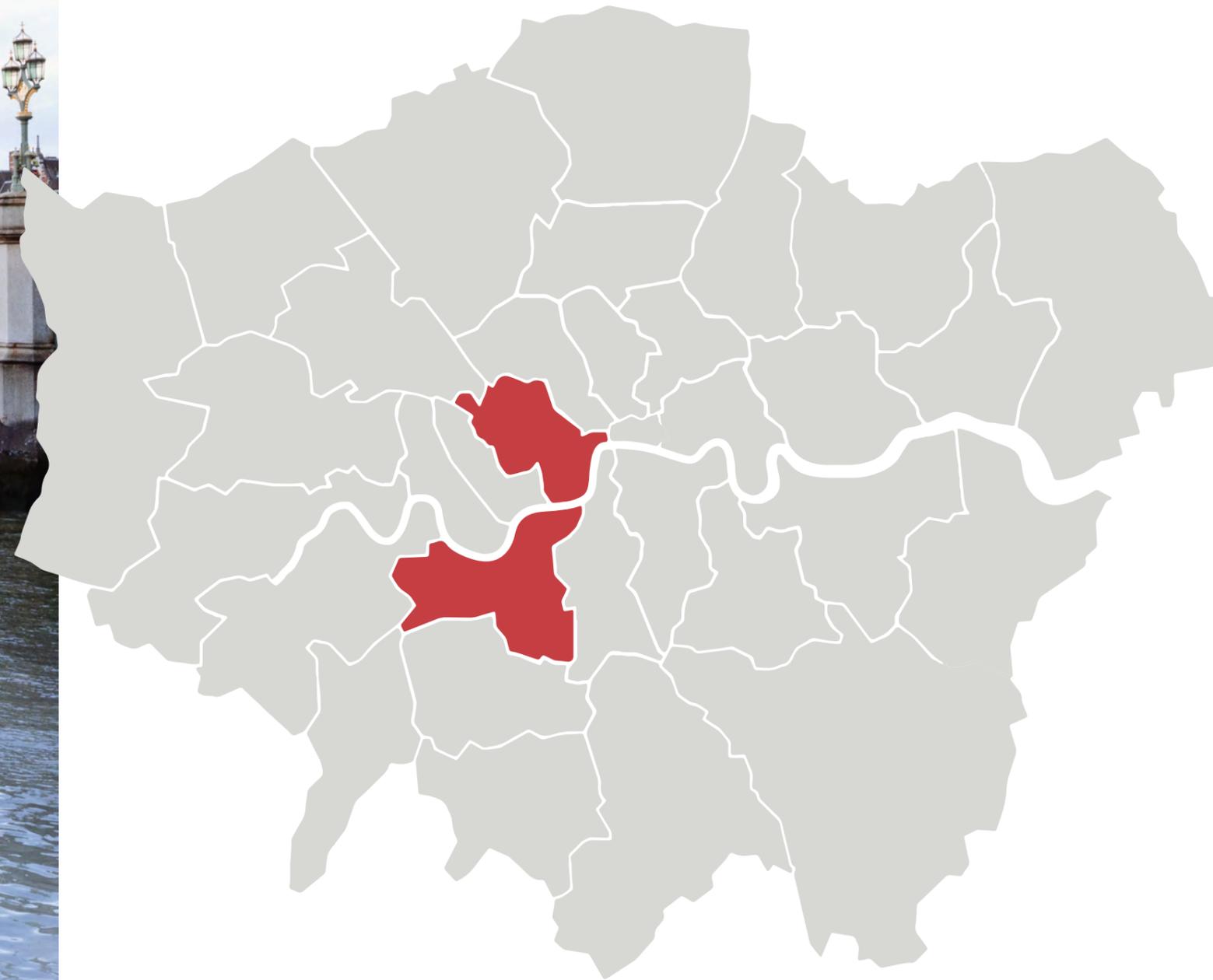


Wandsworth and Westminster

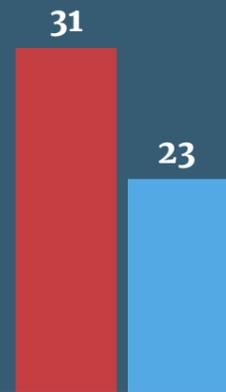
Laura Cunliffe-Hall

Labour pulled off historic victories in Westminster and Wandsworth. The loss of these Councils for the Conservatives will cause serious concern for the Prime Minister.

The Conservative party now only controls four London councils, not seen since the later days of John Major's government. The Tories' councillor base was decimated, dropping sharply from the 511 councillors which was already hitting a record low in 2018.



Westminster



Party	Seats	Net Position
Labour	31	+13
Conservatives	23	-13

Westminster City Council had been run by the Tories since its creation in 1964 but Labour won a majority of seats overnight.

Winning in Westminster had been at the optimistic end of Labour's expectations. It was a hugely symbolic win.

Labour won 31 seats, gaining 12 from the election in 2018, while the Conservatives won 23, 18 fewer seats than back in 2018.

Why did Labour win in Westminster?

There's always a hill to die on – and in this case it was the Marble Arch Mound for the Conservatives. The controversial project had cost up to £6 million and was even attacked by its own architects. Westminster Council's then-deputy leader Melvyn Caplan resigned in August amid the row surrounding the Mound.

Labour's messaging highlighted on the fact that the Mound was wasting millions of taxpayer money during a cost of living crisis. Equally, Labour put forward a positive vision around housing, a key issue, discussing working with the Mayor to build more social rented homes on infill sites and negotiate a higher percentage of social housing relative to intermediate affordable dwellings.

In a city with an increasingly young, diverse, working-class population defined by a housing crisis, this vision clearly resonated with voters. The Westminster Labour group also had a clear story to tell around climate, launching a policy document focused around 'A Green New Deal for Westminster'.

Labour group leader Adam Hug and Cllr for Westbourne ward said: *"It's a great night for Labour not just here but across the country and I think it sends a very clear message to the Conservatives locally and nationally that Labour is back."*

"People who have never voted Labour before have voted Labour today and that built the victory that we've seen tonight."

Hyde Park Councillor Paul Dimoldenberg (whose daughter Amelia, host of Chicken Shop Date provided a celebrity endorsement for Labour on election day), said: *"There is no doubt that Partygate and Boris Johnson were huge factors and many Conservatives just didn't bother to vote in protest."*

"Some came over to us and of course we ran a very positive local campaign, focusing on the local issues that needed to be addressed and that struck a huge chord with so many people who felt that the Conservatives had been complacent."

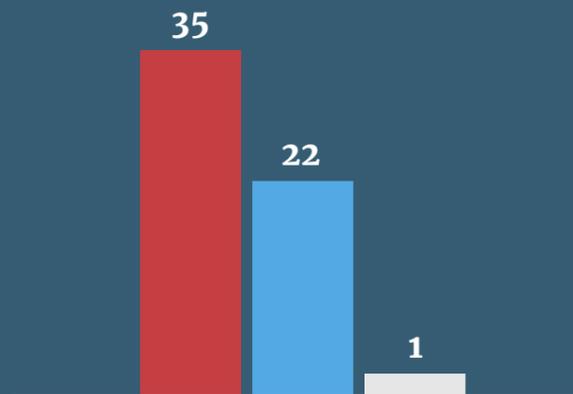
This perception of complacency alienated voters across London (despite bright spots for the Conservatives in Harrow and Croydon) – bearing in mind, this was a city with a Conservative mayor just six years ago.

It also raises questions around if the 'Levelling up' policy which was so successful in the 2019 election, has made Londoners feel like their city is being 'levelled down' and the deprivation and people left behind in London, which has the biggest concentration of child poverty anywhere in the country, is not being recognized by the Conservative government.

Voters in Westminster voted for a change – and a new Labour administration to represent their interests and their communities.

In the borough that hosted the notorious Partygate parties at No.10, the party was very much over.

Wandsworth



Party	Seats	Net Position
Labour	35	+8
Conservatives	22	-8
Independent	1	-

The local authority under the Conservatives was known for reducing council tax and privatising council services, like bin collections. It was also known as Margaret Thatcher's 'favourite council'.

Formerly a Conservative stronghold, the seat became a marginal in 2018, following a 4.1% swing to Labour.

The borough's new Labour leader Simon Hogg promised to *"build a compassionate council that truly listens and keep that same low council tax"* – highlighting how Labour was able to secure victory by matching the Conservative commitment to low council tax with socially liberal policies. At a local level, Labour had also been highly critical of what they perceived as an 'overly close' relationship between the Conservative administration and property developers, and have stated a desire to change the way the Council manages its relationships with developers.

Why did Labour win in Wandsworth?

The Labour campaign had strong and simple messaging – low council tax and let's send a message to Boris Johnson's Conservative party that the public have had enough.

The Tories used green leaflets to try and distance themselves from their increasingly problematic leadership, rebranding candidates as 'local Conservatives'. In the most recent residents' survey in 2019, 85 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the council and 93 per cent with the local area. Almost four out of five even considered it good value for money. However, it was not enough for voters in Wandsworth.

Councillor Ravi Govindia, outgoing Leader of the Council, retained his East Putney seat but was left dejected – the Tories had lost their 'crown jewel'. Mr Govindia said, *"We have done exactly what the residents of Wandsworth wanted... to find that counts for nothing is a sad reflection of the importance of local government not being recognised."*

This statement highlights the extent to which many Conservatives recognized the damage inflicted by their leadership and the taint of 'partygate' overriding their achievements in office.

Looking forwards

Labour's dominant performance in London is particularly worrying for the Conservatives given that 2018, when these seats were last up for election, marked their worst performance in the capital since 1964 when the boroughs were first established.

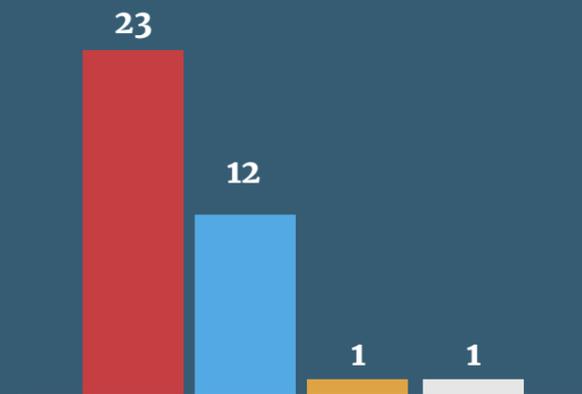
The impact of these results was even greater because every borough council seat in London was up for election and large numbers of seats changed hands. Many councils in the rest of the country elect a third of their members at a time, so there was a limit to how much could realistically change.

Now Labour will seek to hold on to their political dominance in London, whilst focusing on how to replicate this success elsewhere.

But for now, London is very much red.

Worthing

Billy Greening



Party	Seats	Net Position
Labour	23	+6
Conservatives	12	-5
Liberal Democrats	1	-1
Independent	1	-

In a stunning result that will please the party nationally, Labour has taken control of Worthing Borough Council for the first time.

Five years ago, Labour had no councillors in the borough, now they run the town hall with 23 seats on the council, with the Conservatives collapsing to 12 and the Liberal Democrats reduced to one councillor. Even the Deputy Leader of the Council was not spread, losing by more than 450 votes.

The rise of Labour in this coastal community has been meteoric, the demographic shift and overspill from nearby Brighton & Hove had seen Labour reconnect with the town, where for more than 40 years, they held no representation.

The influx of younger, professional families with liberal values looking for more affordable homes has completely changed the political outlook of the area. Now, the Conservatives are seen as outdated and unpopular and have paid the price for local complacency and the national picture.

Labour will now implement their '100 day plan' with new Leader Cllr Rebecca Cooper saying, "Our priorities include our housing crisis - we don't have enough council or social housing". Neighbouring Labour Member of Parliament, Peter Kyle said that the result was, "proof that Labour is reconnecting to traditional coastal communities".

Worthing is a borough prime for regeneration and urban uplifting, voters felt ready for a change despite the positive work that had already been undertaken. Victory in Worthing sets the cat amongst the pigeons on the south coast. This new win for Labour shows how the party is shifting, for a long time Labour were the party of the coastal towns. With social-demographic overspill from cities nearby, it will be interesting to see if this is a trend that continues. If Labour are to win the next election, they will be hoping that it has to be.

Bristol Referendum

Billy Holmes



The mayoral system in Bristol (mayor and cabinet) is to be replaced with a committee-based system in 2024, with 59% (56,113) of voters opting for the change. The result comes less than 10 after the city elected its first mayor, independent George Ferguson, on 15 Nov 2012. It will likely be ratified at a meeting later this month. Following this, Bristol will be run by a full council and 8 policy committees of councillors from 2024 onwards. These will be proportionate to the political make-up of the council.

What this means for comms and engagement

Given the new committees will be made up of members from all political groups, there is a greater risk of delays to decisions around infrastructure programmes.

In the absence of significant change, Carla Denyer seems likely to hold significant decision-making powers from 2024.

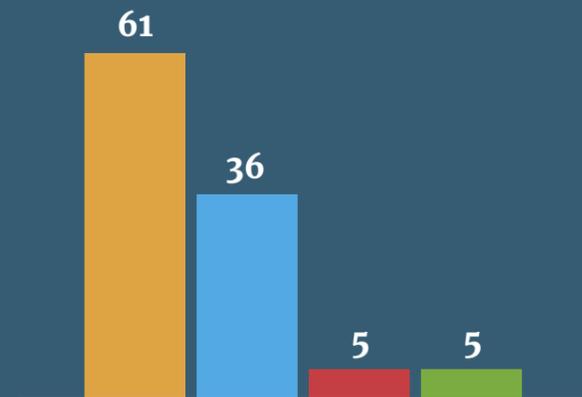
Analysis

Following lacklustre efforts to promote it (main parties solely canvassed areas with traditionally high turnouts), the referendum received an unusually low turnout, standing at 29% - compared to 41.04% and 44.76% in the local elections in 2021 and 2016.

While Labour confusingly made a case for the mayoral system itself, but not the mayor himself, the Green party opted for one clear message: scrap it. This clear messaging, combined with their ability to get their vote out, seems to have swung the vote.

Somerset

Jack Johnson



Party	Seats	Net Position
Liberal Democrats	61	+37
Conservatives	36	-34
Labour	5	-1
Green	5	+1

Over in the southwest of England, these elections proved to be a defining moment for the region. This set of elections ushered in the newly formed Somerset Council, which replaces Somerset County Council in 2023. Both Conservative governments of Theresa May and Boris Johnson implemented structural changes to local government in England which led to several county and district councils being abolished and reorganised as unitary authorities.

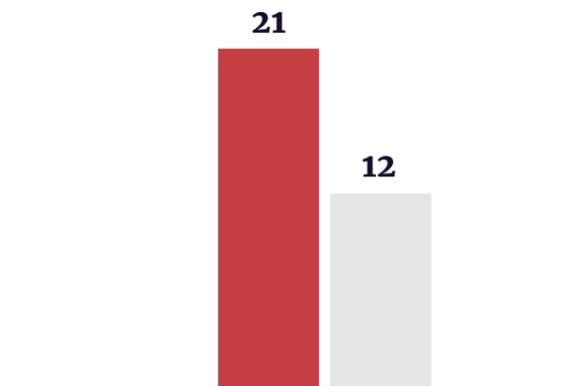
In the Somerset, this new unitary authority will see 110 local councillors elected keeping the same ward divisions as before, but with twice the number of elected councillors.

For the past 13 years, Somerset County Council has been a bastion of Conservative politics, however in line with other national results that has now changed. The Liberal Democrats stormed to victory winning a majority of 61 seats. The Conservatives came second with 36 whilst Labour and the Green Party have five a piece.

Whilst this result may not initially stand out as revolutionary when comparing to the bigger, national picture, what is important to note is that not only will these councillors be in office once the new authority is formally established in 2023, but they will also be in office for the transition period. This means that this Lib Dem majority will be able to have a lasting impact on the region as the next election is not scheduled until May 2027.

Blaenau Gwent

Alastair Fisher



Party	Seats	Net Position
Labour	22	+13
Independent	11	-10

For the last five years Blaenau Gwent has been controlled by independents having previously been a Labour stronghold.

In what can only be described as a disappointing result for the independents, and despite local expectations, Labour succeeded in regaining control of Blaenau Gwent gaining 12 seats to take a majority hold with 21 seats to the independents 12 seats. The losses saw the devastation of the independents, including the council leader Nigel Daniels, with 28 independents elected in 2017 reduced just 12 this election. Turnout however was down from 40% in 2018 to just 32.49%.

Why did Labour win in Blaenau Gwent?

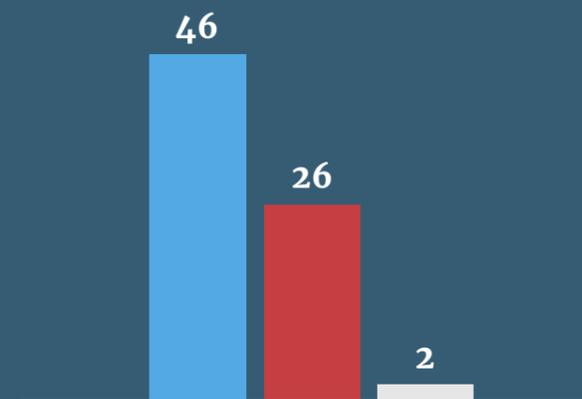
In March this year the independent council leader, Nigel Daniels, faced a no-confidence vote after allegations he had been passed information by a whistle-blower at the council's Silent Valley Waste Services company and chosen to withhold it during a police investigation. While Mr Daniels survived this vote, he did not seem to regain the support of the local community and saw his seat fall to Labour.

Councillor Wayne Hodgins, one of the 12 independents who managed to retain his seat on the council believes that part of the reason behind the loss of so many of his independent colleagues was down to "character assassinations" by his opponents. However the new Labour leader of Blaenau Gwent acknowledge that the party's success was due to the hard work of local activists, as well as "the cost of living crisis obviously [being] on everyone's mind." He expressed his gratitude at people putting their trust in Labour to run the council for them. Labour will be hoping that this marks the end of the political turmoil that has seen Blaenau Gwent go from Labour strong hold to a tussle between Labour and independents since 2008.

Just days after the local election results, Carl Bainton, who was elected in the Ebbw Vale South ward as an Independent, announced on Facebook that he decided to join Labour. At the election results last Friday, Cllr Bainton topped the poll in the Ebbw Vale South ward after 385 votes, Labour's Sue Edmunds was also elected with 354 votes.

Dudley

Billy Greening



Party	Seats	Net Position
Conservatives	46	-2
Labour	26	+2
Independent	2	-

Dudley has been a bellwether Council for decades. At its creation in 1974 it was Labour, before swinging Conservative two years later. Over its history it has swung backwards between the two parties and no overall control.

The 2016 BREXIT referendum was a watershed moment. Dudley voted 68/32 to leave. A year later, the Conservatives capitalised and took control of a minority led administration. Four years later the party swept Labour aside by taking over 60% of the vote on offer to take full control for the first time since 2004.

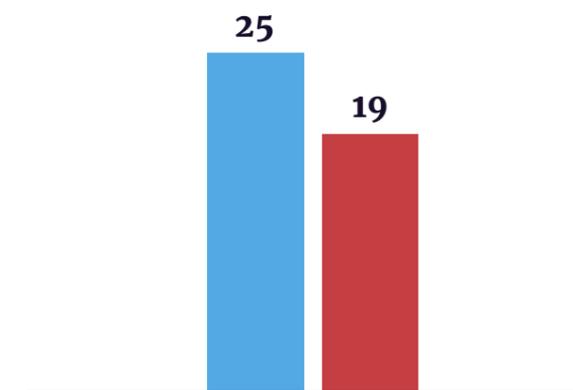
In and around the midlands, the Conservatives have been locking up their support. Shown by the re-election of popular Mayor for the West Midlands, Andy Street last year. In Dudley, Labour now only have one Member of Parliament, showing the amount of work that has to be done for them to win over the hearts and minds of local people.

Dudley is exactly the sort of place that Labour must win if they are to form the next government. They need to appeal to working class patriotic BREXIT voters. In this year's elections, Labour achieved a net gain of two seats from the Conservatives. The Conservatives of course won the election and have a commanding majority within the Council.

Nevertheless, in 2021 the Conservatives in Dudley won 21 out of 24 wards and gained 11 seats from Labour. This year, the parties tied in 12 wards and gained two seats. It might be a low base, but green shoots of recovery can be seen for Labour. The Conservatives will still be walking tall, but will start to look over their shoulders more frequently.

Newcastle-under-Lyme

Jack Johnson



Party	Seats	Net Position
Conservatives	25	+7
Labour	19	-1

Heading up North to the Midlands, we come to Newcastle-under-Lyme in North Staffordshire. And interesting region whose formal coalfield communities and post-industrial neighbour 'The Potteries' (Stoke-on-Trent) have bucked the London trend seeing the Conservative Party secure an increased majority. A reminder

An interesting part of the country, the region was once a strong hold of Labour parliamentarians and local government, but this former majority has been in quick decline over the past decade leading to a total wipe out of Labour MPs in the region at the 2019 General Election and a continued decline of councillors for the party in the region.

There are varying arguments as to why this wide scale decline has occurred, but there are many arguments that an underlying issue has been a lack of investment in infrastructure in the region.

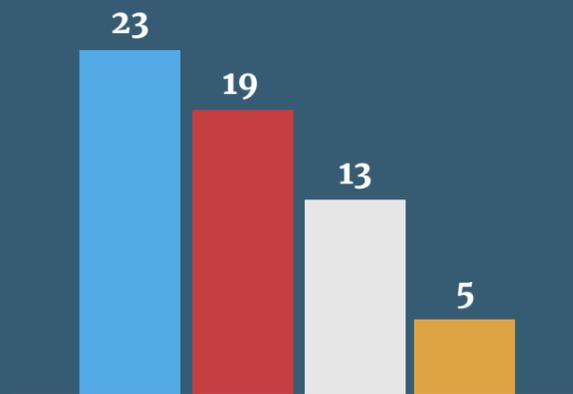
The Conservative Party has secured significant funding for the area through the towns fund and other national investment programmes which no doubt played a part in 'wooing' the electorate.

In Newcastle-under-Lyme, the Conservatives retained control of the council with 24 Councillors up on the 23 they had previously. Areas where the Conservatives made impressive gains were in ex-coalfield seats such as Silverdale, and Kidsgrove & Ravenscliffe (former Labour strongholds).

Labour managed to win 19 seats, but this wasn't enough to regain power at the authority despite gains from the Conservative Party in places like Wolstanton and Bradwell. Whilst national factors such as the ongoing 'party-gate' scandal were no doubt key issues for the electorate, it would appear that ongoing local events and an electorate that continues to feel left behind would be the main driving force behind this election result. To win back Newcastle-under-Lyme, Labour have still got work to do.

Bolton

Lily Marco



Party	Seats	Net Position
Conservatives	23	+1
Labour	19	+2
Independent/Other	13	-1
Liberal Democrats	5	-

In the only Conservative-led Council in Manchester, a heated race finished only four seats separating the Conservatives and Labour. The council remains in no overall control and the balance of power lies with smaller localist parties.

Although better than their last two outings, the night failed to fully live up to Labour's expectations – as they hoped to win back control of this 'Red Wall' council– which first switched to the Conservatives in 2019. Labour gaining 2 seats, missing out on several key targets with their total number of councillors standing at 19. The Conservatives increased their tally by one – to 23. Labour secured 38% of the votes cast (up 2.88%), to the Conservatives 34% (down 4.7%)

No overall control is more of a demonstration of a lack of confidence in Labour, rather than an endorsement of the Conservatives - based on the historic nature of the area being red up until 2019.

What does this represent?

Local issues appear to be at the heart of this election result. Areas that have been outlined by the Conservatives in their bid to win control; focused on regenerating the town centre, cleaner air zones, tackling anti-social behaviour and crime, and a focus on levelling up by investing in job opportunities. It appears that the support for the Tories came from voters, who believe the answer to their problems is the flagship levelling up policy held by Conservatives.

Localised issues appear to have influenced the outcome, as despite the Partygate scandal, and the cost of living crisis the public have still not rallied in support for Labour. The continued support for a raft of local candidates signals how local issues are viewed as increasingly important, alongside the people of Bolton disillusioned with national politics, and a response to emphasis on levelling up.



What happens now?

A working cross-party alliance will now have to be formed. This has the potential to be challenging as in January 2021, Liberal Democrats ended their working arrangement with the ruling Conservatives after two other councillors voted against the budget. Tensions exist in the current council due to structure of current council and will continue, as the leaders of both parties believe they can forge the alliances needed with smaller parties to lead the borough which are a mixture of dissatisfied former Labour, Conservative, UKIP and other councillors.

What's the competing visions between the two parties?

Separated by only 4 seats, and with 31 councillors needed for a majority, the competing views will be prevalent throughout the council. The Conservatives have expressed their aims to continue the flagship 'levelling up' policy by regenerating the town centre and creating a clean air zone for the region and the continuation on building on brownfield sites.

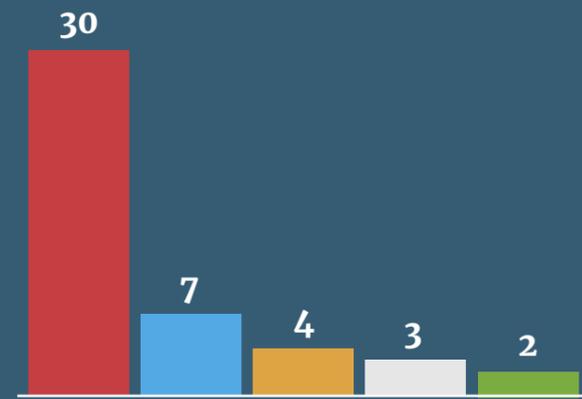
Labour, although agreeing on importance to regenerate the town, wants to open the town hall, and create key partnerships that devolve budgets to key stakeholders in the community. Disagreements will ensue, as Labour Leader, Cllr Peel described his manifesto as a *"radical alternative"*.

As talks begin, the real takeaway from these results is that there a mist of uncertainty amongst the politics of Bolton, national issues appear to have sat on the backburner, and now the opposing parties' leaders bid to lead the council will rest on their approaches to tackling local issues and key factors which matter to the town.

This area is one to watch for the future if Labour want to be back in government after the next general election.

Cumbria

Alastair Fisher

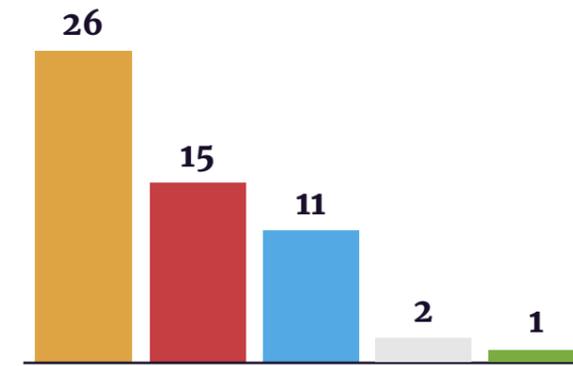


Cumberland

Party	Seats	Net Position
Labour	30	+12
Conservatives	7	-14
Liberal Democrats	4	+2
Independent	3	-2
Green	2	+2

With two new unitary authorities taking over in Cumbria from the previous Cumbria County Council and six district councils, this was always going to be an interesting race. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have seized control of the two new authorities, with Labour taking the Cumberland authority winning 30 of the 46 seats and the Liberal Democrats taking Westmorland and Furness winning 36 of the 65 seats.

The new Cumberland authority will see 30 Labour, 7 Conservatives, 4 Liberal Democrats, 3 independents and 2 Green councillors take up their seats making Cumberland a strong hold for the Labour party. While the new Westmorland and Furness authority will see 36 Liberal Democrats, 15 Labour, 11 Conservatives, 2 independents and 1 Green councillors take up their seats.



Westmorland and Furness

Party	Seats	Net Position
Liberal Democrats	36	+13
Labour	15	+3
Conservatives	11	-16
Independent	2	-1
Green	1	+1

These two new authorities will operate as shadow authorities until taking up their powers fully on April 1 2023. The responsibilities of Shadow Authority members in this first 12 month period will be to agree a members allowance scheme, a constitution and implementation plan – ensuring a smooth transition of services. The Shadow Authority will also take control of the budgets of the existing councils but cannot halt any investment decisions they have already made.

With Cumbria being a key electoral battle ground between Labour and the Tories, Labour will be very glad to see that they have been successful in winning and regaining ground within the traditional “red wall”. It remains to be seen if the northern working class voters of the “Red Wall” have returned to Labour permanently or if these elections were a reflection of the current state of play of Westminster politics and another ‘Partygate’ protest vote.



For more information

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