



Guide to the
2024
council elections

Adam Gray

Introduction

The Conservatives have endured two years of poor local election results. 2022 was fairly bad and 2023 was among the worst Tory performances in a set of local elections ever.

The polls suggest 2024 will be at least as difficult as 2022, and possibly equal to 2023. Either way, the Conservatives can expect very heavy losses, because the last time the seats up for election this year were last contested in 2021.

That was the year elections resumed after the Covid lockdown, with a big feel-good factor benefiting the Conservative government: a spring reopening, the country ahead of the curve on vaccines, broad support for the way the pandemic had been handled by the government; relief that the draconian measures brought in to supposedly save lives and protect the NHS were at an end.

Just as 2023 was among the worst local elections for the Tories, 2021 was among the best.

It wasn't just Boris Johnson's so-called "Covid bounce" that aided the Conservatives. The country was still realigning politically after the EU referendum of 2016 and, more recently, the way Remain-supporting politicians

had tried to block Brexit in parliament.

This mattered still, even almost two years later, because, in the main, the councils areas up for election were Leave-voting. A lot of these were traditionally Labour-voting so-called Red Wall areas, still pretty angry at the way their Labour representatives had campaigned and behaved.

There were disproportionate swings to the Conservatives in many northern and Midlands Leave voting places: Nuneaton and Bedworth, Redditch, Worcester, North East Lincolnshire, Wakefield, Rotherham, Sunderland, Walsall, Dudley and Derby to name a few.

Brexit cut both ways though. There are Remain-voting areas that began swinging against the Conservatives after 2016 and are still moving against them: much of Surrey, Oxfordshire and South Cambridgeshire for example. However, it is a quirk of fate that far fewer of these types of areas are up for election this year. But these are where the really big Conservative losses in 2019, 2022 and 2023 occurred.

This is the leanest point of councils' electoral cycles: the fewest seats up for election of the four. There are no elections in Wales, Scotland or London

(though there is the mayoral election and election of the London Assembly there), and most of England does not elect this year either.

There are also a few councils slotted into this round that we only see every four years: Bristol, Warrington, Rotherham and Stroud. This being an even year, we also see a return to elections in that handful of councils that elect by halves: Adur, Cheltenham, Fareham, Gosport, Hastings, Oxford, Nuneaton and Bedworth.

This year there are no elections in councils we are familiar seeing in these lists: Amber Valley, Derby, Liverpool, Slough and Wirral, to name a few. They switched to all-out elections last year. Some councils this year, like Maidstone and North Hertfordshire are following suit.

Given the amount staging elections cost and the financial pressures councils are under, it is perhaps surprising that so few have requested to move over to all-out elections, so they can spend their precious funds on front-line services.

The relatively small number of seats up this year means that in raw numbers, the Conservatives may lose far fewer seats than in either 2022 or 2023. But the

proportion of seats they will fail to defend will be higher than both those years - possibly both those years combined.

But Labour may not have an easy election night either. Several council areas, especially in Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire, have high Muslim populations, immensely unhappy with Labour's stance on the Israel Gaza conflict. We saw at the end of February how this backlash can harm Labour in such areas when George Galloway gained the parliamentary seat of Rochdale.

There are scores of other areas which have seen defections of Labour councillors and which will be vulnerable if independents or single-issue parties stand in the local elections.

Nominations have not opened, let alone closed, at the time of signing this guide off so how much of a threat Labour faces (and it will be disproportionately Labour affected, though there have been a handful of defections from the Tories too).

Where the threat is real, I set the factors out in that council's summary. But places like Bradford, Kirklees, Calderdale, Pendle, Burnley, Hyndburn, maybe Preston, Walsall and parts

of Sandwell and Wolverhampton are ones to watch.

Labour has also seen some break-aways by what might be described as Corbynite, left-wing councillors dissatisfied at Keir Starmer's positioning of Labour more widely than on just Gaza. Such defections have removed Labour from power in Hastings, Norwich and Oxford, and diminished Labour to almost extinction in places like Stroud and Gloucester.

The post-Brexit realignment continues, even though it is going to be disguised by voters' revolt against a Conservative government they wish to see the back of. Again, where these trends are significant I have high-lighted them in the specific council's narrative.

It is a matter of record, however, that Labour is far weaker in terms of vote share - and often seats held - now, after fourteen years of Conservative government, than it was at the equivalent point in the run up to the 1997 general election.

Labour's vote is so entrenched in many of these areas that the lower share the party now commands is still more than enough to keep control.

But the gradual fragmentation of the big parties in local elections is one of the lesser explored features of the 2020s.

As disaffection with both big parties, and the failure of the Lib Dems to capitalise on that disenchant-ment, grows, local parties and organised independents are becoming more prevalent. Community independents, area Firsts, Coventry Citizens, The Yorkshire Party, Confelicity in Southend, the Black Country Party and many others - they may not be creating electoral earthquakes yet but the fact they are breaking onto the scene is the story of the moment. You cannot win if you do not stand.

There are a handful of Lib Dem councils up for election this year but in nearly all cases they are very secure: Cheltenham and Eastleigh for example. They also hold Kingston-upon-Hull fairly narrowly but a by-election in the run up to the local elections, which they held easily enough suggests Labour cannot regain the city this year.

The Greens have two big opportunities in these elections: Bristol and Stroud. Both will be incredibly hard for them to win, but if they cannot then when and where will they ever?

The very limited pushback by the government against net zero costs and the peak awareness of climate change should create optimal opportunities for the party.

No doubt they will continue to pull off individual spectacular

results, coming from nowhere to win seats, as they have for the past few years.

Green representation on councils is becoming normal rather than eccentric. But having one or two councillors here and there is no substitute for wielding power, They gained Mid Suffolk last year but Bristol is the glittering prize this time around.

Although many voters use local elections as a real-life opinion poll: a means to protest against the government of the day, there are still likely to be some results based on local factors. There are two councils, for example, where dreadful decision-making has saddled their electors with huge debts: Thurrock and Woking.

There are also councils where controversial decisions, usually concerning local plans mandating huge amounts of house-building, have resulted in a voter backlash: Tandridge and Tunbridge Wells for example. The decision of councillors to fell large amounts of trees cost Labour control of Sheffield and the Tories Plymouth. Some politics is local.

A couple of notes. I provide a series of proportional maps throughout this guide. These maps show either the council as it is when this guide went to print (including defections known at that point) or, where boundary changes are coming in May, how I estimate these seats would have voted had they been elected to

these past three years. They are not, in other words, a forecast of the result.

Secondly, in the table opposite I provide a summary of who controls each council right now, and what I believe the outcome of the elections will be. Some of these outcomes are highly probable: Labour will gain Milton Keynes, for example (else an extraordinary Conservative bounce-back will have happened). Others are finely balanced: Cannock Chase and Nuneaton and Bedworth for example (both of which have boundary changes).

These forecasts are based on a seat-by-seat consideration of who is likely to win in each council, There are known unknowns, such as how many Gaza candidates will stand and the impact those localist parties will have.

The purpose of this guide is not to predict outcomes but to highlight where to watch on election night, and the days and weeks afterwards as we process and analyse these results.

Local elections are complex and produce masses of data. Many see them as little more than a pointer to the "election that matters" - the general election. But the choices as to who wins matters locally and council elections map how the country makes those choices year-in, year-out.

Summary

Council	Now	likely						
Adur	Con	NOC	Hartlepool	NOC	Lab	Rushmoor	Con	Lab
Barnsley	Lab	Lab	Hastings	NOC	NOC	St Albans	LD	LD
Basildon*	Con	Con	Havant*	Con	NOC	Salford	Lab	Lab
Basingstoke & Deane	NOC	NOC	Hyndburn	NOC	NOC	Sandwell	Lab	Lab
Blackburn with Darwen	Lab	Lab	Ipswich	Lab	Lab	Sefton	Lab	Lab
Bolton	NOC	NOC	Kingston-upon-Hull	LD	LD	Sheffield	NOC	NOC
Bradford	Lab	NOC	Kirklees	Lab	NOC	Solihull	Con	Con
Brentwood	NOC	NOC	Knowsley	Lab	Lab	South Tyneside	Lab	Lab
Bristol	NOC	NOC	Leeds	Lab	Lab	Southampton	Lab	Lab
Broxbourne	Con	Con	Lincoln	Lab	Lab	Southend-on-Sea	NOC	NOC
Burnley	NOC	NOC	Maidstone*	NOC	NOC	Stevenage*	Lab	Lab
Bury	Lab	Lab	Manchester	Lab	Lab	Stockport	NOC	LD
Calderdale	Lab	Lab	Milton Keynes	NOC	Lab	Stroud	NOC	NOC
Cambridge	Lab	Lab	Mole Valley	LD	LD	Sunderland	Lab	Lab
Cannock Chase*	NOC	Con	Newcastle-upon-Tyne	Lab	Lab	Swindon	Lab	Lab
Castle Point*	Ind	Ind	North East Lincolnshire	Con	NOC	Tameside	Lab	Lab
Cheltenham*	LD	LD	North Hertfordshire*	NOC	NOC	Tamworth	Con	Lab
Cherwell	NOC	NOC	North Tyneside*	Lab	Lab	Tandridge*	NOC	NOC
Chorley	Lab	Lab	Norwich	NOC	Lab	Three Rivers	LD	LD
Colchester	NOC	NOC	Nuneaton & Bedworth*	Con	Con	Thurrock	Con	Lab
Coventry	Lab	Lab	Oldham	Lab	NOC	Trafford	Lab	Lab
Crawley	Lab	Lab	Oxford	NOC	NOC	Tunbridge Wells	NOC	NOC
Dorset	Con	NOC	Pendle	NOC	NOC	Wakefield	Lab	Lab
Dudley*	Con	Con	Peterborough	NOC	NOC	Walsall	Con	Con
Eastleigh	LD	LD	Plymouth	Lab	Lab	Warrington	Lab	Lab
Elmbridge	NOC	LD	Portsmouth	NOC	NOC	Watford	LD	LD
Epping Forest*	Con	Con	Preston	Lab	Lab	Welwyn-Hatfield	NOC	NOC
Exeter	Lab	Lab	Reading	Lab	Lab	West Lancashire	Lab	Lab
Fareham*	Con	NOC	Redditch*	Con	Lab	West Oxfordshire	NOC	NOC
Gateshead	Lab	Lab	Reigate and Banstead	NOC	NOC	Wigan	Lab	Lab
Gloucester	Con	LD	Rochdale	Lab	Lab	Winchester	LD	LD
Gosport	LD	LD	Rochford	NOC	NOC	Woking	LD	LD
Halton	Lab	Lab	Rossendale*	Lab	Lab	Wokingham*	NOC	LD
Harlow*	Con	Lab	Rotherham	Lab	Lab	Wolverhampton	Lab	Lab
Hart	NOC	NOC	Rugby	NOC	NOC	Worcester*	NOC	NOC
			Runnymede	NOC	NOC	Worthing	Lab	Lab

Adur

current council

16 Con, 9 Lab, 2 Grn, 2 Ind

seats up

9 Con, 4 Lab, 1 Grn, 1 Ind

Conservatives go into this election defending a majority of just three seats in Adur: Shoreham, Sompting and Lancing.

Like Worthing to the west, this borough has a history of anti-Tory votes aligning behind the Lib Dems before that party collapsed.

But unlike Worthing, that vote has not now coalesced behind Labour to anything like the same extent and, in any event, Adur is a more mixed district,

with still strongly-Tory wards off the Sussex Downs: enough to keep them - just - in power. For now.

Adur has a very strong Liberal history: the party ran the council, often with quite large majorities, until 2002 then collapsed entirely. Also like Worthing, this ex-Liberal vote spent some time floating around different parties - UKIP made a brief incursion. But unlike Worthing, it hasn't (yet) coalesced behind Labour though it's showing some signs of it.

In part that's because the two areas are different: a town like Worthing has a consolidated identity, and people who choose to live in towns are politically

somewhat different from those who live in more rural or villagey areas. Adur is more a borough of smaller townships and settlements and also has more of a sparsely-populated rural inland. There is less reason why, because Shoreham votes a certain way, Lancing will.

The slightly good news for the Tories is that there is just one split ward left (**Eastbrook**, Con seat up). So, to remove the Conservative majority Labour needs to crack a ward they don't currently hold.

The worry for the Tories is that in 2022, the last time this council elected, Labour came close in three wards: **Hillside** (12 votes short), **Widewater** (54) and **Buckingham** (78) with

the electoral environment worse for the Conservatives now than it was then.

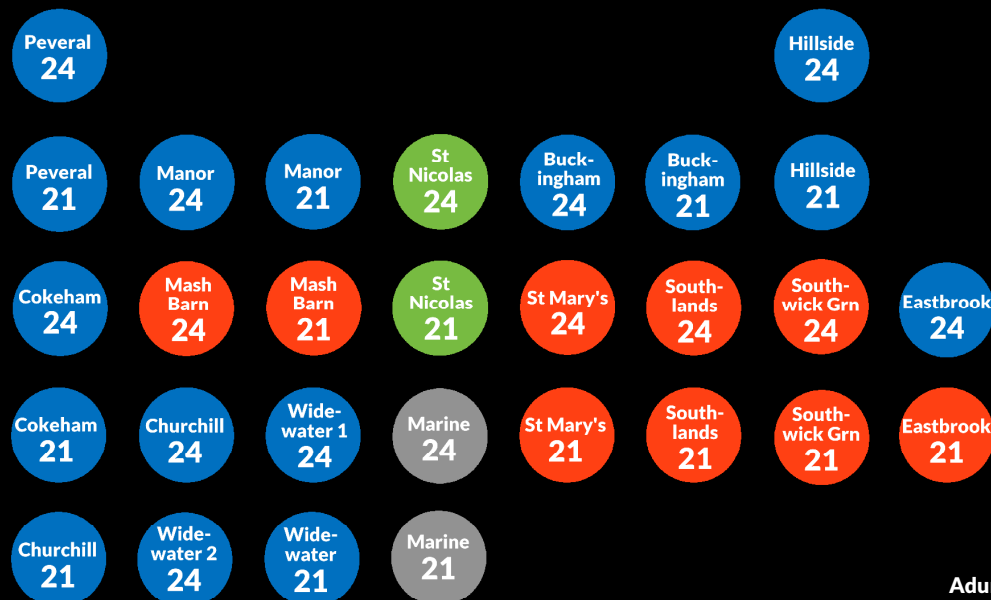
Widewater is the only Adur ward with three councillors and two are up this year so there are four low hanging fruit for Labour to try to snatch. Mash Barn, immediately to its north, is already Labour-held.

The Greens also have the capacity to win wards where previously they've been nowhere - as they did in **St Nicolas** (their vote rose by fifty-one percentage points to gain the second seat in that ward in 2022) and they have activists aplenty in next-door Brighton they could bus in (as do Labour, and from Worthing too).

Can the Greens grow their tally of councillors? They hold both seats in St Nicolas now, so they need to break in to a new area to do so. But the Greens are a little like the Lib Dems insofar as they can build enclaves of support, putting together clusters of wards.

That being so here, the only adjoining Conservative-held ward is Buckingham, but they only won 11.5% there in 2021 and didn't even contest it in 2022. The Labour-held ward to the south, St Mary's, looks fairly solid for that party too, though they've only won it four times in the recent past (2016-2022) so

There's one other glint of hope for the Tories: two independent councillors represent **Marine**



Adur

ward and the Conservatives don't stand against them, suggesting they might be allies in a hung council. If that's accurate, the Conservatives could keep control without a majority unless they lose more than three seats.

It'd be moderately impressive if the Conservatives retain their majority in Adur.

Barnsley

current council

48 Lab, 10 LD, 3 Con, 2 Ind seats up

16 Lab, 3 LD, 1 Con, 1 Ind

These will be the last local elections in Barnsley before boundary changes and all-out elections in 2025.

Although Labour has a very comfortable majority here: 33 seats, that's relatively low for the party when in opposition nationally. In 1996, for example, Labour had a 60 seat majority and in 1973: 56. The same is true in vote share: last year Labour polled 46%; in 1996: 69% and 1973: 54%.

A large part of the explanation for Labour's ebb is that Barnsley was a heavily Leave borough, with large majorities voting for non-Labour parties in the 2019 general election (Brexit Party finishing second in both Barnsley constituencies).

This is also a post-mining town now: we are a generation and more from the days when almost everyone from Barnsley had some connection to King Coal.

That is not to suggest that the town has forgotten its past, nor that it has finally found a new seam of prosperity, but the mining tradition bound the community together behind Labour and now that binding has gone, the visceral strength of its loyalty to the party has ebbed.

This district is also a lot more than Barnsley: it includes plenty of villages which may vote the same way as the eponymous town but are remote and distinct, and may be more interested in contemplating candidates not wearing Labour rosettes.

In local elections Labour's vote share, which beyond Penistone is spread very evenly, is more than enough to win the vast majority of seats. But they have been showing vulnerabilities in specific wards. Based on the 2023 results Labour is under pressure in **Darton West** (from the Greens), in **Monk Bretton** and **Rockingham** (from independents) and possibly in **Worsbrough** where an independent holds one of the seats.

There are two longer shots: the Yorkshire Party receives a decent vote in Central but was 390 votes off last year. And the

SDP took more than a quarter of the vote from nowhere in **Dearne South**. They've shown in Leeds that constant pressure focussed on a specific ward can lead to a breakthrough.

The Conservatives won zero seats in 2023 - not even **Penistone East**, which they'd held consistently since 1999. This obviously creates serious worries for the Conservative MP for Penistone and Stocksbridge, Miriam Cates.

At the very least her team will be looking to regain Penistone East and to put in an improvement in now-Lib Dem held Penistone West and **Dodsworth**. The Tories also won **Rockingham** in 2022 but collapsed there in 2023 when an independent took the second seat.

Basildon

current council

26 Con, 10 Lab, 6 Ind

Seats up

all - boundary changes

Basildon holds all-out elections this year following quite minor, but not too helpful (from the Conservative perspective) boundary changes. This gives Labour a chance of removing the Conservative majority, currently ten seats.

Labour has no credible chance of taking overall control here:

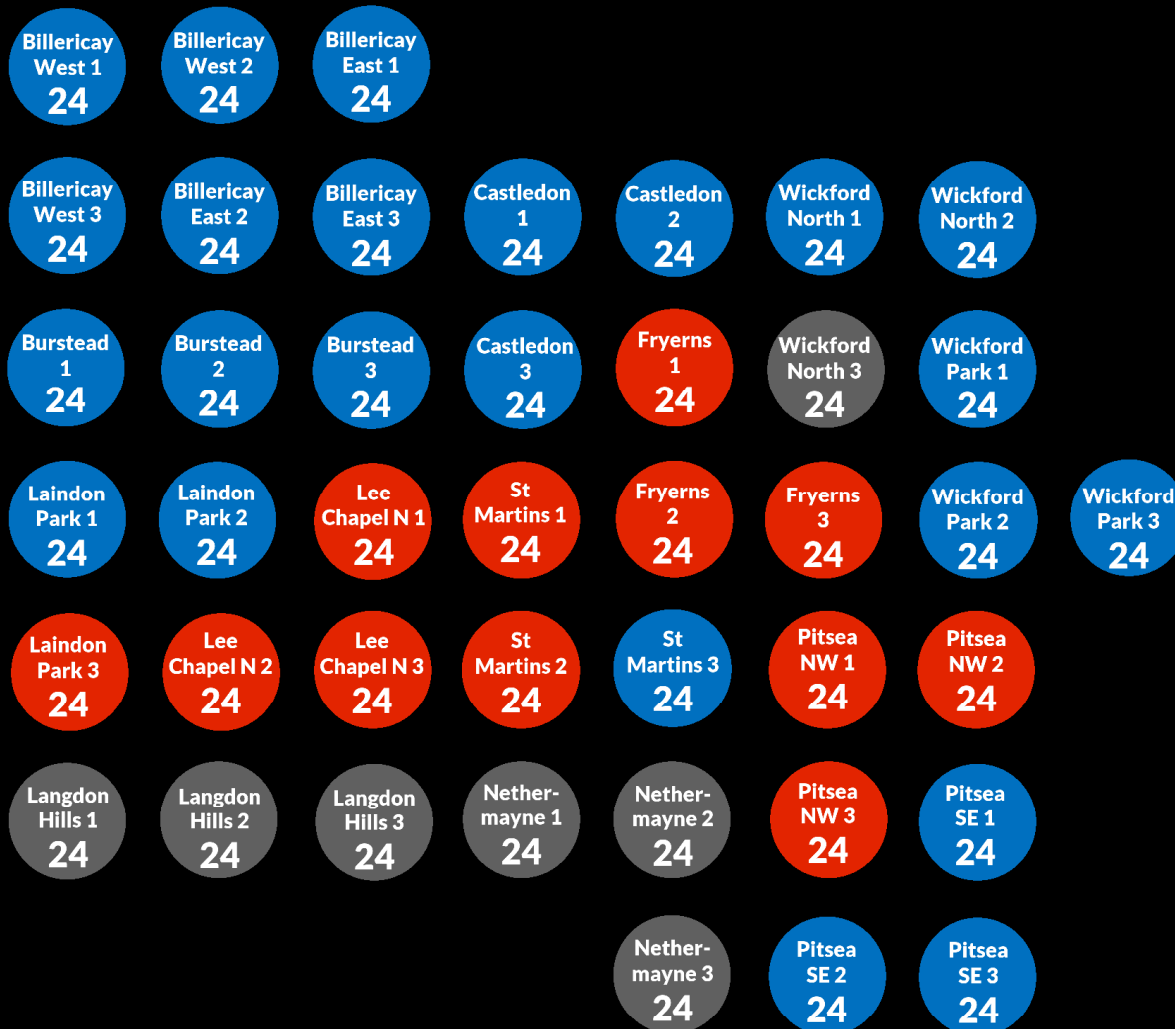
the last time they outpolled the Tories in this council was 1999 (though, given the massive majorities the Conservatives stack up at the Billericay end of the district they could probably win enough seats while losing the popular vote by a fair bit).

Even erasing the Conservative majority will be difficult: the Tories actually increased it last year despite the terrible national environment. Basildon has been swinging from Labour for years - long before the Brexit referendum.

The Conservatives have three wards that should be very safe: **Billericay East, Burstead, and Castledon & Crouch**. **Billericay West** is closer - the Lib Dems aren't entirely out of the picture here, but they were over 500 short last year, which is a lot.

Then there are the now two Wickford wards. These are a battle between the Tories and Wickford Independents. Of the current seven seats, the independents hold one. There will now be six and the seat lost is probably Conservative-held. Let's assume, for now, that the independent survives but the Tories win the other five. That's seventeen Conservative seats from the Billericay side of the borough.

Now to the Basildon town side. There are two wards Labour wins relatively comfortably: **Fryerns** and **Lee Chapel North**. **St Martin's** is a little tougher -



Basildon

they nearly always win here though the Tories currently hold one of the two seats.

The ward gains an extra councillor and half of abolished Vange ward, which is a Labour-leaning marginal. Likewise, **Pitsea North West** is a grind for Labour to win but they typically do by quite small margins. So between ten and twelve Labour councillors likely here.

Nethermayne and **Langdon Hills** are held by what used to be the UKIP presence on Basildon council, now independent. They win Nethermayne easily but Langdon Hills is much closer between them and the Conservatives. If the independents hold both wards they have six councillors - a pick-up of one (Langdon Hills is 2-member, increasing to 3).

If the wards go the way I've suggested, the Conservatives are already down four seats without a vote being cast.

That leaves just two swing wards: **Laindon Park** and **Pitsea South East**. These are very close: in 2023 Labour won Laindon Park by 25 votes and the Tories won Pitsea South East by 19. If there's any Conservative recovery from 2023 the Tories should edge Laindon Park: the ward leans their way in anything other than atrocious election years and they have two of the three councillors right now.

The half of Vange not transferred to St Martin's goes into Pitsea South East, so that help Labour slightly here are several paths for the Conservatives to hold on; they're just tougher climbs than they were before the boundary changes. They need five seats from the nine in Pitsea S.E., St Martin's and Laindon Park.

The electoral maths is simple. If the Tories can hold five of the six seats in these two wards (and/or oust the independent in Wickford) they retain control. If Labour can gain two of these seats, they deprive the Tories of their majority.

Basingstoke and Deane

current council

23 Con, 10 Lab, 9 LD, 6 Ind, 1 Grn
seats up
11 Con, 3 Ind, 2 Lab, 2 LD

The Conservative vote collapsed in Basingstoke and Deane in 2023: down eight points on an already unimpressive 37% in 2022. Never before have Conservatives polled below 30% in this district - and it cost them their overall majority. There is no credible chance of them regaining it this year; far more likely they will slip back further.

Both sides of this district are equally represented on the council: 27 councillors for urban Basingstoke and rural Deane. But they vote very differently.

Basingstoke has 10 Labour councillors, eight Conservatives, 5 Lib Dems, 3 Independents and one Green (a defector from Labour). Deane has fifteen Conservatives, eight independents and four Lib Dems - Labour has no seats here.

This creates a specific dynamic unique to these relatively few councils that contain such contrasts. The Basingstoke side is something of a free-for-all with the three big parties and independents all competitive and able to win with rather low vote shares. The rural side is Conservative vs. Lib Dems or independents.

This year the Tories are defending twelve seats - double the number they managed to hold last year. Labour and the Liberal Democrats defend two apiece and independents three (including a defector from the Tories in Basing)

But things are slightly complicated because, while the Conservatives are tanking, Labour isn't benefiting all that much, even if we isolate just the Basingstoke wards. Yes, they've recovered from a truly awful 2021 result when the Tories polled more votes across these nine wards but they have ceded

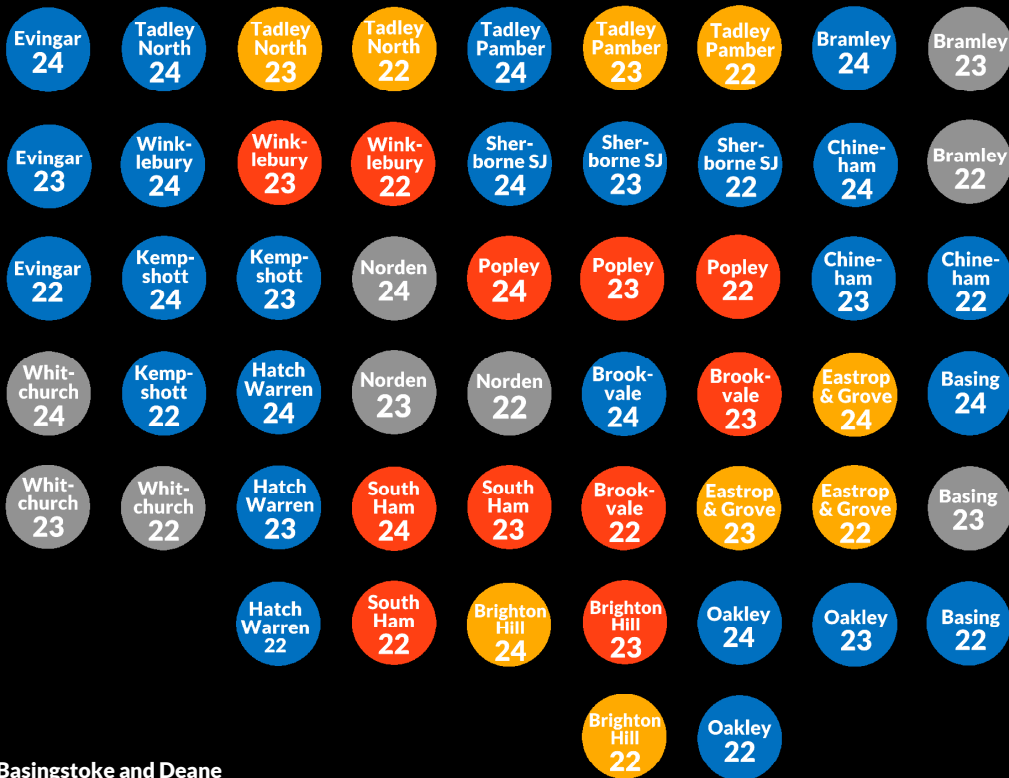
Norden ward (Labour without a break until '21) to independents and have allowed Lib Dems back into **Brighton Hill** after a brief period when they looked to have claimed the ward.

Labour polled 29% in just Basingstoke in 2021, 33% in 2022 and just shy of 37% last year. The Conservatives have gone from 32% to 26% in the same period.

This swing to Labour probably means **Brookvale & King's Langley** is lost to Labour, though the Greens might stand given this is the ward of their sole defector councillor. Labour also handily won **Winklebury & Manydown** last year, though this was a defence by a Labour incumbent in a split ward so the Tories might do better this year when they have the incumbency factor. Labour will also try to oust the Lib Dems in Brighton Hill but will likely not succeed.

The Lib Dems should take the last seat they don't already hold in **Tadley North**, but the more rural Tadley ward, **Tadley & Pamber**, is tighter: if there's any Conservative recovery from 2023 they should hold this one.

They'll also struggle to stave independents off their last seat in **Bramley** ward. And there is one curiosity: the Women's Equality Party came just 75 votes short of gaining their first councillor, in **Hatch Warren**



Basingstoke and Deane

and **Beggarswood** ward last year. Their candidate, Stacy Hart, will be standing for a third time this May.

Five potential further losses would leave the Conservatives ten seats further from regaining their majority here yet they would still be, by some margin, the largest group on the council.

Blackburn with Darwen

Current 38 Lab, 12 Con
Seats up: 11 Lab, 6 Con

Blackburn might be one of the first tests of whether Labour's stance over Gaza is inflicting any electoral damage in a heavily Muslim area: 47% in the 2021 census.

Of course, for any damage to be inflicted voters need a vessel to

protest through and there may not be one: elections on the Blackburn side of this borough tend to be straight Labour-Conservative battles.

Given Labour's position is barely distinguishable from the Conservatives on Gaza, those upset enough by the conflict are probably not going to vote Tory to press for a change of approach.

So there either needs to be an organised independent chall-

enge, or for the Lib Dems or Greens to both become more vocal on the issue AND be capable of fielding candidates. An alternative scenario is that Labour's vote stays at home.

It's been this lack of competition in the majority of the borough (the Darwen side is much more pluralistic) that largely explains Labour's firm grip: they polled a thumping 63% of the vote in 2023, while the non-Tory opposition vote was just 7%.

This lack of electoral diversity helps Labour because, in likelihood, more of the vote for Lib Dems and Green would come from its stack of votes rather than the Conservatives' - and the only way the Tories stand a chance of snatching wards is if ten, fifteen, twenty or more points come off Labour's share.

The Conservatives did relatively well the last time these seats were fought, winning six. Last year, in contrast, they held just three.

Of the "swing" three, the one that should be hardest for them to hold is **Audley and Queen's Park**. This was gained by social media sensation Tiger Patel (Google him!) for the first time ever on a 32% swing. Cllr Patel resigned from the Conservatives in protest at his party's position on Gaza. Labour took 67% in the ward last year so, with him either standing down

or splitting the vote as an independent, Tory hopes are surely non-existent here.

The second of the three is **Ewood** ward, home of Blackburn Rovers Football Club. This is not much more competitive a ward than Audley: the Tories have only won it twice since 1973 (out of 36 tries!) but it's much closer fought. In 2023 for example, it split Labour 58%, Conservative 42% - not close, but not beyond reach, either.

Part of the ward, for now, also lies in marginal Rossendale and Darwen constituency, so the Tories may benefit from greater political activism than other wards in unwinnable Blackburn. Much will depend on how hard Cllr Jon Baldwin has worked and how much of a personal vote he can muster. The odds must still be against him though.

Finally, **Darwen South**, which is a somewhat different kettle of fish given it has two Tory councillors and, apart from 2023, has produced some fairly comfortable wins for the Tories.

Again there will be a lot more political organisation in this ward than in uncompetitive Blackburn wards and the Lib Dems stand here as well. Labour regained a seat here last year for the first time in seven elections, and by only eighty four votes so if the Tories are only slightly less unpopular in

May they have a decent chance of holding this one.

Labour won every other ward on the Blackburn side bar one with more than 60% of the vote - two with over 90% and the only threat to them is a deeply split electorate. In any event, Labour has a 3-to-1 majority in Blackburn and Darwen and is safe whatever happens.

Bolton

Current council

26 Lab, 17 Con, 11 Res, 6 LD

Seats up

9 Lab, 6 Con, 3 Res, 2 LD

Several pundits expected Labour to recapture Bolton last year when all-out elections took place. But it wasn't to be, more because five residents' group councillors won seats in wards that would otherwise almost certainly have gone Labour.

Five plus the twenty six Labour councillors would have given them an overall majority.

But not everything can be blamed (if that is what you wish to do) on the residents. Conservatives have made inroads into two traditionally Labour wards down the eastern spine of the borough: **Brightmet**, and **Little Lever** and **Darcy Lever**. Labour regained footholds in both last year but the fact that they missed three

seats across the two shows there are deeper problems for the party in Bolton.

Seven Bolton wards split their representation last year. It matters which rank these councillors occupied because the ones with the fewest votes go up for election this year.

Voters not used to voting for three councillors in one go do seem to spray their votes around more casually than those who always do so) This may be for the novelty value; because a particular candidate has caught their eye, or because they want a wider variety of councillors representing them.

Of the seven, four are Labour up for election this year, two are Tories and one is a Lib Dem. **Westhoughton South**, the split ward the Lib Dems are defending, only gave them a 26 vote majority over Labour and there are over 600 Conservative voters to squeeze if a credible tactical voting case can be made. That's hard because they did in the 2019, though this is one of their weaker wards in Bolton West constituency.

Labour should be incredibly vulnerable in **Astley Bridge**, a ward they only win when the Conservatives are at their very lowest ebb (the last time was 1994-1996). Kate Taylor is defending a 14-vote majority in

a ward where the other seats are Tory-held.

Brightmet, immediately east of Bolton town centre, was a pretty loyal Labour ward until the Tories won it four times in succession from 2018. Last year they retook two of the seats - but this one by just 28 votes.

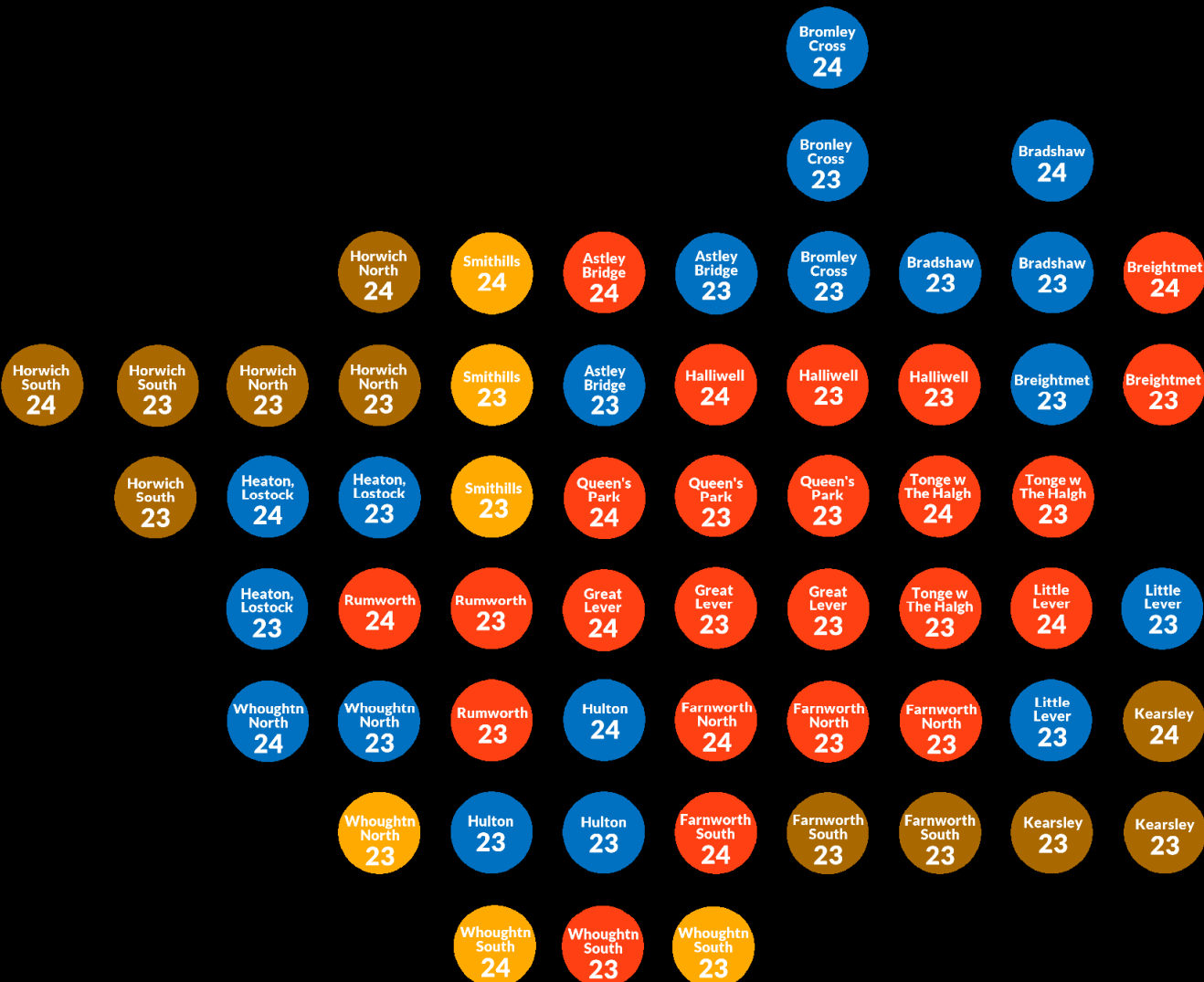
If Labour struggle to win **Brightmet** in a deep Conservative trough like 2023 they will struggle in 2024, but at least this ward has a Labour tradition, unlike **Astley Bridge**.

Things appear slightly less precarious for Labour in **Little Lever** and **Darcy Lever** where their majority is 163. That said the losing Tory candidate last year trailed a long way behind his elected running mates.

Whether the fact his surname was Khan and the other two had "white-sounding" names was a factor in his defeat is unknown - but if that was a factor and a different Tory candidate stands this time Labour may find its defence harder.

There are big residents' association and Reform UK votes here which both sap support from the major parties but also reduce the vote share needed to win.

The fourth Labour defence is against **Farnworth** and **Kersley First** in **Farnworth South**. Here



Bolton

Labour won only because First fielded just two candidates, who were easily elected. Presumably they'll be fighting Labour for this third seat so, again, Labour's defence may be tougher than it appears.

All four are going to be tough defences for Labour and the odds are somewhat higher that they'll fall back from their 2023 tally- possibly ending with just one more councillor than the Tories.

Their best shot at offsetting any potential losses is in **Hulton**: the only Conservative defence against Labour. Hulton is transition territory as the dense urban core of Bolton becomes rolling countryside. Hulton, in recent years at least, has leaned Conservative so this was quite a surprise result.

Not, however, as much a surprise as Labour's gain in **Astley Bridge**. There was a 54 vote gap between Tory Derek Bullock and the only losing Labour candidate here last year, Logan Pratheepan. Ethnic politics may have played a role in this result: the two Labour winners were Shaikh and Khan whereas Pratheepan is a Tamil surname.

If the Conservatives are less unpopular nationally they should be able to hold Hulton easily, but if they remain in the mire Labour could take full

control of the ward's representation.

The Conservatives also defend one of their two seats in next door **Westhoughton North** (now paired with the rather unappetising Hunger Hill), but this time from the Lib Dems and they have just a fourteen vote lead over them. the northern Westhoughton division is far more Conservative than South, in part because it is far more rural.

Reform and First, who only fielded one candidate apiece, took 16% of the vote between them last year and this seems more than enough to have dragged them to near parity with the Lib Dems. They should though be slightly better placed to defend this ward than Hulton, even though the Lib Dems are voracious local government campaigners.

The split wards are not the only ones vulnerable this year. Horwich First are vulnerable in **Horwich North**, which they seized from Labour last year, the seat up by just 27 votes. First are more secure in **Horwich South** which is a three-way marginal.

Further evidence that Labour is not firing correctly in Bolton town is the fact that the Tories came close to actually gaining Halliwell and Rumworth wards, both in the urban core of Bolton itself. The Tories were just 77

votes short in **Halliwell**, which hasn't voted Conservative since the mid 1970s, and 219 in **Rumworth**, which never has. They'll struggle to gain either this year, but it's not beyond doubt - and that in itself is remarkable.

Labour looks pretty solid in **Farnworth North** (the old Harper Green) but Farnworth and Kersley First didn't contest it in 2023. If they do, things will be much tighter for Labour, though they would still be expected to win.

Because of how the seats in split wards fell this year it is impossible for Labour to gain the five seats needed for an overall majority in Bolton - as suggested earlier they are slightly more likely to actually slip back one or two. But it's not inconceivable they could slip back further. Bolton has at least one more year (and probably many more if Labour win the general election) of no party in overall control.

Bradford

Current council

55 Lab, 16 Con, 8 Grn, 9 Ind, 5 LD

Seats up

14 Lab, 6 Con, 5 Ind, 3 LD, 2 Grn

If Blackburn presents Gaza difficulties for Labour, they're present in spades in Bradford. This, of course, is one of the

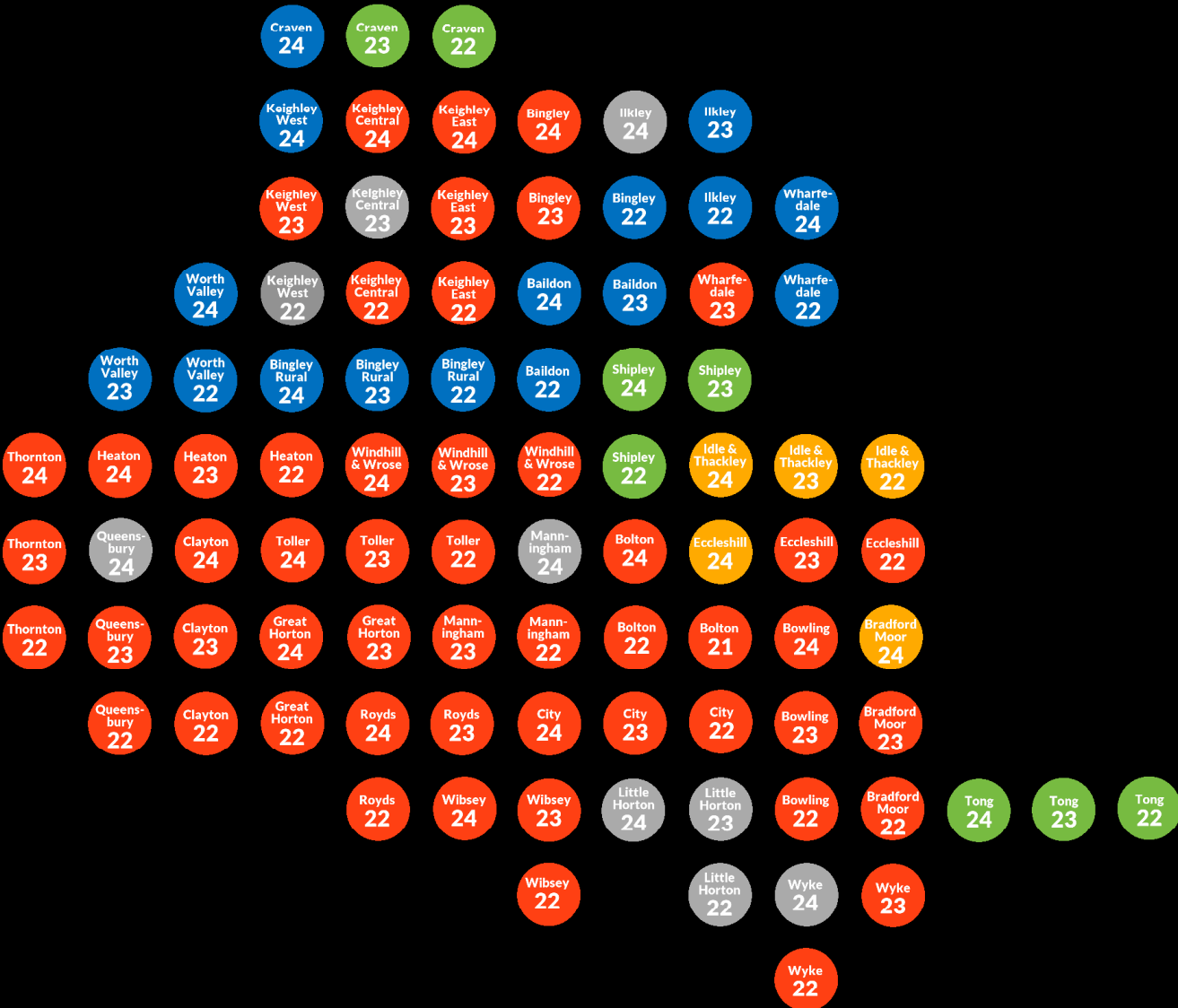
growing list of areas George Galloway popped up in a parliamentary by-election to torment Labour for whatever perceived betrayal of the Muslim community he asserts has been committed at any given time.

When he won the Bradford West by-election in 2012 his (then) Respect party also won five council seats. The party didn't survive long on Bradford council but Labour has had sporadic problems with independents in its heavily Muslim wards ever since, some of them Respect survivors.

If they're going to have problems, either from pro-Gaza independents or an organised party, it's hard to forecast where Labour could lose as there are several heavily Muslim wards right across Bradford city and Keighley.

All three Little Horton councillors have split from Labour - one will be up if he chooses to stand again, as will a second in **Manningham. City Centre, Heaton** and maybe even **Toller** (84% Labour in 2022) are most likely potential flash points for Labour with their volatile Muslim base.

Despite the Conservatives' national difficulties Labour has been having some problems in the three core Keighley town wards. If there's a Gaza challenge in all three wards that



splits Labour's vote deeply enough the Tories could win **Keighley Central, Keighley East and Keighley West**.

The Conservatives have had local problems as well as national ones. Conservatives who won in **Keighley Central, Queensbury and Wyke** in 2021 have all become independents, which will limit their losses. Labour hold the other two seats in all these wards but automatic gains for Labour other than - probably - in Wyke cannot be taken

for granted. **Queensbury** in particular could go any one of three ways: Labour only wins here when the pretty strongly right-of centre vote is split, as it has been in recent years. The BNP was elected in Queensbury four times so while Queensbury is a fairly working class, fairly white ward, its cultural values lie far from Labour's.

The Conservatives don't just have to fend off the Greens in their rural wards. They've already lost all three seats in **Bingley** ward to Labour but for the first time ever also lost **Wharfedale** last year by 22 votes. They outpolled Labour by just 150 in **Baildon** - only **Bingley Rural** and **Worth Valley** appear to be secure for the Tories.

During the depths of the last Labour government the Lib Dems picked up large protest

votes in both the Muslim and whiter, more middle class suburban wards of Bradford East. Controversial Lib Dem MP David Ward was expelled from his party for attempting to imitate George Galloway's religious demagoguery (though his party stood aside for him when he tried, unsuccessfully to defend his **Bolton and Undercliffe** council seat).

They have only one safe ward now: **Idle and Thackley**, and they are defending their last seats in **Bradford Moor** and **Eccleshill**.

Greens took the third seat in **Tong** last year and will be looking for wards to expand into. They will likely seize the last Conservative seat in rural **Craven** ward, and were 160 short of snatching Ilkley from the Tories last year. They pulled off a big increase in **Heaton** ward but were still over 1,000 votes behind Labour there.

Brentwood

Current council
18 Con, 17 LD, 2 Lab
Seats up
All (boundary changes)

The Conservatives lost control of the small Essex district of Brentwood last year and this year they have the misfortune of all-out elections following boundary changes which should

hand a majority - albeit, in likelihood, a fairly small one, to the Liberal Democrats.

Going forward there will be uniform 3-member wards. That has meant a fairly radical boundary overhaul.

The most interesting clashes will be where Conservative and Lib Dem wards have been smashed together - for example.

Based on the last two rounds of council elections in Brentwood, this is how we might have expected these new wards to have voted

Labour's three seats in **Brentwood South** look secure, as do the Lib Dems in **Brentwood North, Brentwood West Pilgrim's Hatch** and **Warley** for twelve secure Lib Dem seats.

The Conservatives should be able to count on **Blackmore and Dodinghurst** (the successor to Tipps Cross), **Herongate, Ingrave and West Horndon, Hutton North** and **Hutton South**, giving them twelve seats.

That leaves four battleground wards. In the amalgamated **Brizes, Stondon Massey and South Weald** the Tory Brizes side is quite a bit bigger than the Lib Dem South Weald side, but lets split that 2 Con, 1 LD regardless.

The Lib Dems gained **Hutton East** last time fairly comfortably

but the new iteration of the ward takes in much of abolished Hutton Central, which the Tories won easily in 2022. So again, let's split that 2 Con, 1 LD for now.

Ingatestone, Fryerning and Mountnessing and Shenfield wards have traditionally been reliably Tory wards but the Lib Dems have won them in both previous rounds of elections and given there's been no marked improvement in Tory fortunes, it's not unreasonable to assume they'll win all six seats this time.

So twenty Lib Dems, sixteen Conservatives and three Labour councillors is my best guess: an overall Lib Dem majority of one seat (though with Labour backing in most votes probable)

But some wards tend to go somewhat skewy in all-out elections where voters usually only get one vote. In other words the council might stay hung or the Lib Dem majority may be a couple of seats larger.

Bristol

Current council
25 Grn, 24 Lab, 14 Con, 5 LD,
Ind 3
Seats up All

Last year the Green Party won an overall majority on a council for the first time: Mid Suffolk.

This year, they have a very real opportunity to win a second and, with all due respect to Mid Suffolk, this time a very much larger, more powerful council: Bristol.

Labour has held the directly-elected mayoralty of Bristol for two terms but voters have abolished the job meaning that the Greens need eleven gains to win a majority on the council and administer Bristol for the next four years.

There are five wards currently split between Labour and the Greens: **Ashley, Bedminster, Central, Eastville** and **Lawrence Hill**. They ran the Lib Dems very close in **Hotwells and Harbourside** - just 26 votes short in this single member ward.

They aren't too distant in **Horfield** and **St George's West**; then they are a lot further back, but with over 20% of the vote, in **Frome Vale** (though this should be a Labour-Conservative battleground in the newly created Bristol North East constituency). Maybe Conservative held **Westbury-on-Trym** and **Henleaze**, which is a four-way marginal gets them over the majority line?

The Greens' principal problem is that they are geographically concentrated in the Bristol West (soon to be Bristol Central) constituency and, other than those split wards and the

Lib Dem seat, they've already got hold of everything there.

The rest of Bristol is, essentially, a Labour-Conservative battleground.

This should give Labour - just one seat behind the Greens - an easier path to an overall majority. But they will need to win Green seats to get there - there are in theory enough Tory seats to get them to a majority but the Conservatives are unlikely to lose everything they currently hold: there still exist some strong enclaves for that party.

A lot of Green seats are vulnerable - especially wards they gained in 2021, though incumbency should help them. **Easton, Lockleaze, Southville** and **Windmill Hill** could be most vulnerable - bar **Easton**, these are wards in Bristol South, outside the Green comfort zone of the city centre.

Labour splits two wards with the Conservatives: **Avonmouth** and **Lawrence Weston** (the ward that includes the weird, long seaward-extent of the city that extends down the Bristol Channel past Weston-super-Mare); and **Frome Vale**.

The Tories have two other marginals: the afore-mentioned **Westbury-on-Trym**, and **Henbury** and **Brentry**. If voters abandon the party, **Bishopsworth** and **Stockwood** could

fall, leaving just **Stoke Bishop** in their hands.

Two Lib Dems split and formed the Knowle Community Party in, funnily enough, **Knowle** ward. If they stand against their former party that ward could become a toss up. Labour was slightly ahead of the Greens for second there. Zoe Goodman, elected as Labour in **Filwood**, became independent in late 2023: again, a ward that might be competitive if she stands but should otherwise be a reasonably easy Labour hold.

Broxbourne

Current council
27 Con, 3 Lab
Seats up
9 Con, 1 Lab

Even in last year's terrible set of local elections, nothing changed in Broxbourne: 9 Conservatives, 1 Labour councillor elected. This is politics as usual in this small Hertfordshire district. Labour hasn't been able to win any ward beyond the Enfield-borders **Waltham Cross** since the height of the Blair ascendancy.

Beneath the surface though, Labour came somewhat close in three wards, all up the spine of the district: 132 votes in **Cheshunt North**, 151 in **Cheshunt South** and 161 **Rosedale** and **Bury Green**. In

addition, the Green Party polled 29% in **Broxbourne** and **Hoddesdon South**, though they were still 2 to 1 behind the Conservatives there.

The Greens polled very strongly in East Hertfordshire district to the north, and within that district in Hertford and Ware, which lie just beyond Broxbourne's boundaries. With no elections in East Herts this year the Greens could send activists across the border. But Broxbourne ward is one of the safest Tory wards in this very safe district: it's never elected a party other than the Conservatives.

Burnley

Current council
11 Lab, 11 BIG, 8 Con,
7 Grn, 7 LD, 1 Ind
Seats up
4 BIG, 3 Con, 3 Grn,
2 Lab, 2 LD, 1 Ind

At last year's local elections Labour crawled its way back to twenty-two seats on this deeply hung council, and were able to resume minority control in Burnley - the next largest party had just eight councillors.

Then the Israel-Gaza conflict happened and eleven Labour councillors left the party, including the council leader. This independent group, in

coalition with the Lib Dems and Greens now run the council and Labour is firmly back in opposition.

Four of these splitter councillors are up for election this year - representing the four heavily Muslim wards in the centre of town (**Bank Hall, Daneshouse, Lanehead and Queensgate**) and, given they're

now in control of the council it seems unlikely they'll go silently into the night.

What remains to be seen is whether BIG attempts to expand its group by fighting any of the wards they don't hold.

They're unlikely to oppose their Lib Dem and Green coalition partners but that still leaves six wards, albeit that the ethnic diversity of wards declines dramatically beyond their strongholds: Burnley is a deeply ethnically polarised borough.

BIG is clearly a party principally for Muslims and anti-Semite so-called progressives.

Labour is unlikely to just give BIG a pass: ex-comrades tend to fight like rats in a sack so there'll be a bun fight in at least these four wards, and who knows what will happen as this bust up ripples out.

Even without the presence of BIG the last time these seats were contested in 2021, eight of the fifteen wards changed hands. With BIG presumably taking disproportionately more votes from Labour than anyone else, things become even less predictable.

The Greens have a firm grip on two wards; **Trinity** and **Cliviger with Worsthorne**, and will be fighting Labour hard to hold onto their sole seat in **Brunshaw**. They missed out on a second last year by 59 votes.

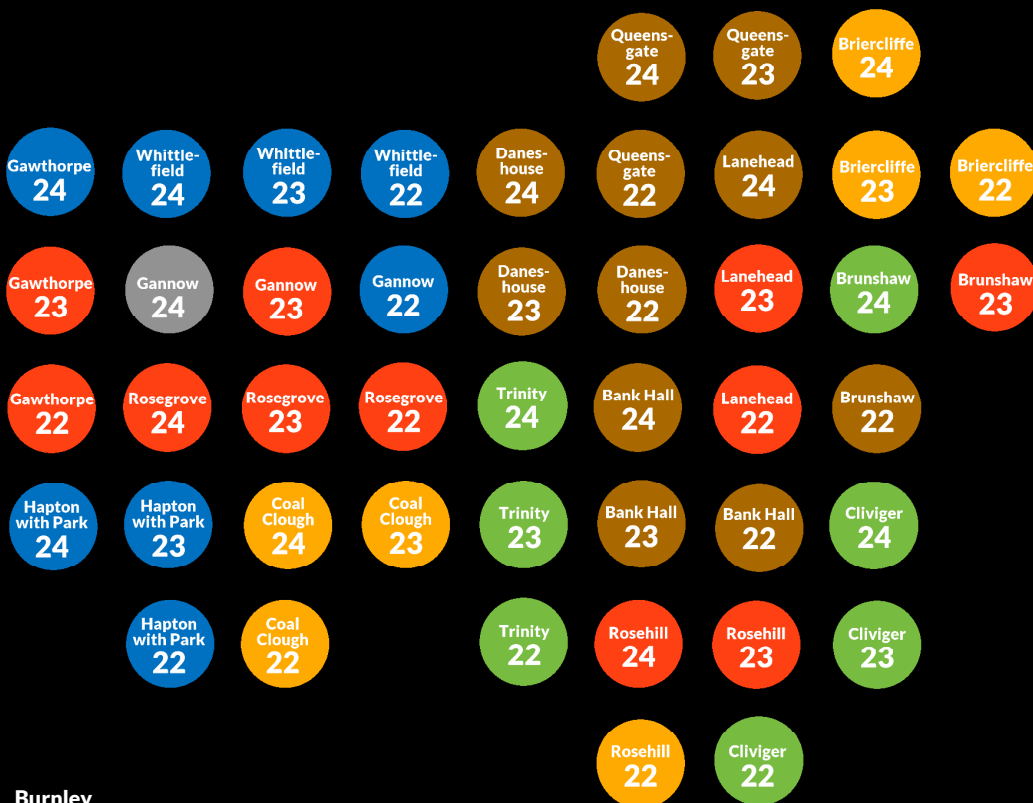
The Conservative strength in Burnley has shifted from east to west, right across the district.

They used to win the two rural Pennine Hills wards of **Cliviger with Worsthorne** and **Briercliffe**, but these are now held by the Greens and Lib Dems respectively. They now count on the ward closest to Accrington: **Hapton with Park**, and nearby **Whittlefield with Ightenhill**.

Holding both seats is probably the height of their ambitions given the national context, though they also gained a seat in **Gawthorpe** sandwiched between these other two Tory wards, and also one in **Rosehill with Burnley Wood**.

This will be harder to hold: the ward is more typically a Labour-Lib Dem battleground and is on the eastern side of Burnley, away from the better Tory prospects. Tories polled just 13% in Rosehill last year, and 28% in Gawthorpe (but against Labour's 65%).

All in all, almost every ward will be in play this year because of the creation of the Burnley Independent Group - and



Burnley

especially if they contest more wards than the four they currently represent.

Bury

Current council

30 Lab, 11 Con, 7 First, 3 Ind

Seats up

10 Lab, 3 Con, 2 First, 2 Ind

Labour was sliding into a bit of difficulty in Bury until the all-out elections two years ago happened. Their majority was down to just five seats by 2021. On the one hand this is a competitive district, but on the other for Labour to be slipping after eleven years of opposition nationally emphasised the real problems the party had in Leave-voting, relatively white areas in Lancashire

Their main headache was in the town of Radcliffe where a local residents' group was sapping enough Labour vote to either win seats itself or allow the Conservatives in due to a divided opposition.

Labour offset their Radcliffe problems (which haven't been resolved) by quite decisively winning the northernmost ward of **Ramsbottom** from the Conservatives, but struggled in Elton (the town of Bury's northern suburbs).

But Conservative national unpopularity when the post-

boundary change all-out elections took place in 2022 stabilised the electoral landscape for Labour and, in 2023, their majority rose to eleven.

Radcliffe First now has almost complete control of the three wards covering that town: there is just one Conservative councillor in **Radcliffe North & Ainsworth** and she clung on by 61 votes last year; the rest are Firsts.

That, of course, gives the other parties a chance to recapture three First seats this time round but the party won **Radcliffe East** with 60% and **Radcliffe West** with 57% so chances of them losing either are slim. North & Ainsworth is the key, three-way, marginal.

Labour won **Elton** by just 137 votes last year despite the most favourable national environment for the party in years. The Conservatives will be working furiously to regain a second councillor in this split ward.

Labour also nearly gained **North Manor** - a ward that has always been Conservative since it was created in 2004. They missed out here by 82 votes. But if the Tories can hold it in 2023, they'll start as favourites in 2024.

The Conservatives lost a seat in **Pilkington Park** ward last year but this time around it is Labour defending in this ward. Pilkington Park is an in-

between ward but basically the affluent outlying parts of Prestwich, with a large Jewish population. The Labour winner was Michael Rubinstein.

Labour's improvement here in part shows that tension between Jewish communities and the party have diminished since Jeremy Corbyn stood down as leader, but also the dire state of the Conservatives: they should be able to hold this ward relatively easily.

If national politics does intrude the tension between Jewish and Muslim parts of Bury may prove difficult to manage for Labour as its Muslim constituents push for a tougher line against Israel over Gaza. Wards like **Bury East**, **Redvales** (Bury town South, where the council deputy leader is standing down following his arrest for a stalking offence) and **Unsworth** are worth watching. It may also help the Lib Dems regain a seat in **Holyrood**. But Bury is not a Bradford or even a Rochdale.

Labour's majority in Bury is secure for at least one more year though such is the nature of this borough with so many swing voters that, should Labour be in government by the time of the 2025 local elections, they can expect much rougher battles for control hereafter.

Calderdale

Current council

27 Lab, 14 Con, 6 LD,

2 Grn, 1 Ind, 1 vac

Seats up

8 Lab, 7 Con, 2 LD

Calderdale is the first clear example of the problem the Conservatives face because of how well they did when this tranche of seats was last elected in 2021 as the UK reopened after Covid.

Look at the seats dashboard above: Labour has a 2 to 1 lead in councillors overall but of the seats up this year, the Tories are essentially on parity with them. Thus, even if the Conservatives do a lot better in vote share than last year, they will find it almost impossible not to lose - at least - two or three seats.

Which of their councillors have been beached high and dry by the 2021 Tory high tide? The two toughest holds will be **Illingworth and Mixenden**, north of Halifax, where their councillor has already resigned (that's the vacancy shown above).

The Conservatives sporadically win this ward - the time before 2021 was 2000, then 1992, and there's a strong anti-Labour vote here that has occasionally elected the BNP but Labour won 55% to 30% last year.

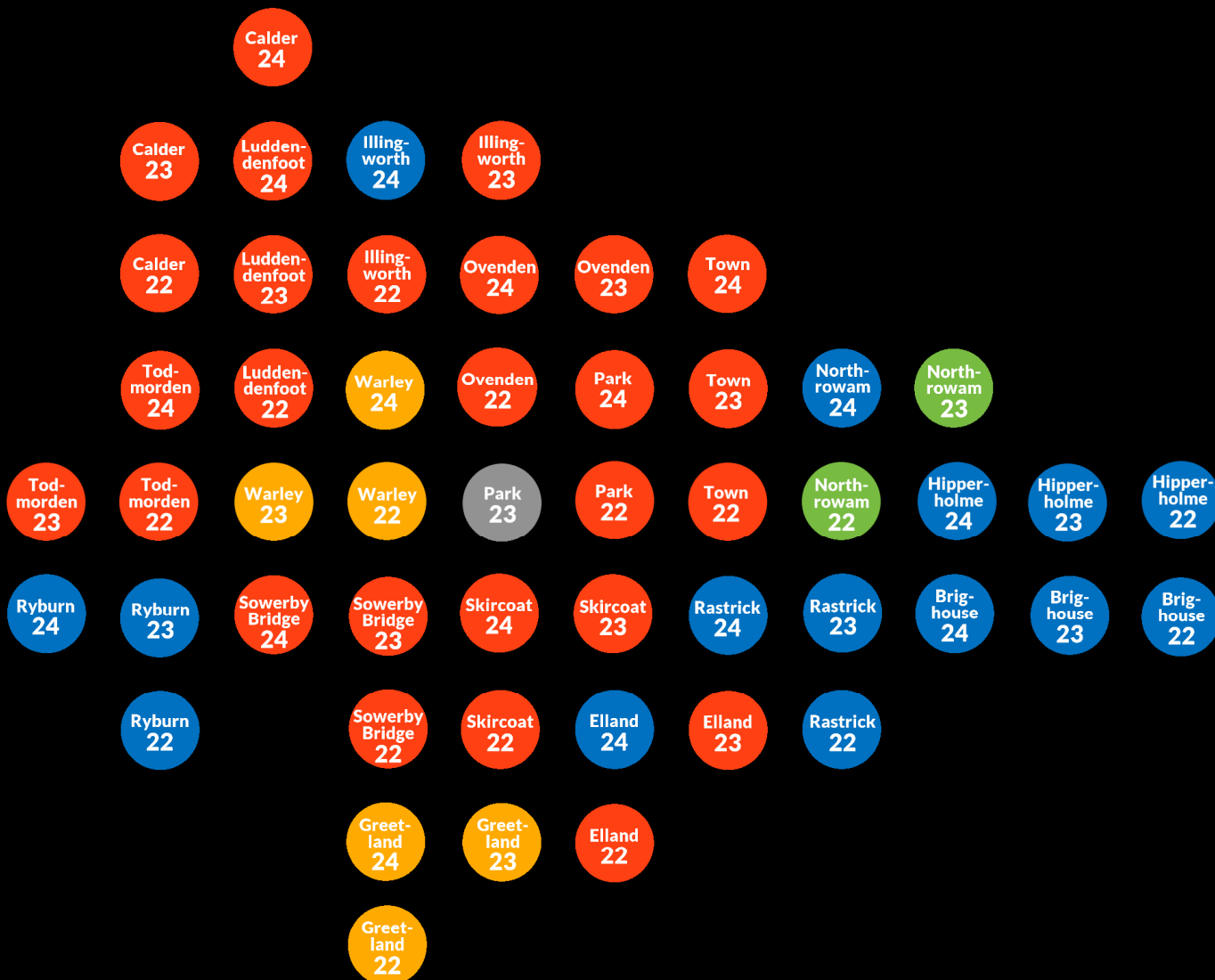
Their second most vulnerable incumbent is John Ford of

Elland ward, again the only Tory in an otherwise Labour (and historically Lib Dem) ward. He won by 62 votes in 2021 but Labour won 47% to 29% in 2023 so it'd take some personal vote to save him.

The Greens won their first seat on Calderdale in **Northrowam and Shelf** (some of the best ward names in the country can be found here!) in 2022 and took their second here in 2022, winning 63% so the prospects

for the last Conservative look bleak.

Labour ran the Conservatives close in **Rastrick** last year but essentially losing those three seats listed above should bring



the party down to their rock bottom. Thereafter, as Yazz sang, the only way is up for them.

Calderdale is a fairly volatile district so upsets wouldn't stun anyone. Halifax is fairly polarised between white and Muslim wards with an electorate that feels pretty disconnected with mainstream politics - hence the occasional flirtation with the far right (though Illingworth's the only ward they won) and independents.

There is some potential for a Gaza backlash - watch **Park** and **Skircoat. Warley**, another ward with a fairly high Muslim vote, is Lib Dem.

Like Bury, Labour is secure in Calderdale until it is in government - but then they'll really have difficulty hanging onto it.

Cambridge

Current council

25 Lab, 11 LD, 4 Grn, 1 Con, 1 Ind

Seats up

9 Lab, 4 LD, 1 Grn

Cambridge became somewhat volatile in last year's local elections.

Though Labour easily retained control, losing a seat a piece to the Greens and Lib Dems, in

three ward: **Arbury, Cherry Hinton** and **King's Hedges**, the Conservative vote surged. They missed out on Cherry Hinton (a ward they'd not won since 2004) by just 63 votes, and in Kings Hedges (which had never voted Tory) by 138.

Then, following a change of council leadership, the Labour councillor (and deputy leader) just elected in **King's Hedges** resigned and the Conservatives won the ensuing by-election. Mo Hossain being the first Tory councillor elected in Cambridge since 2012.

The voters were reacting to a set of deeply unpopular Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (by a different name) with the Conservatives the only party locally even remotely sceptical of such policies.

Depending on your political outlook, Labour either wisely listened to public opinion and scrapped the LTNS or shamelessly betrayed the climate emergency and capitulated to short-term populist opposition.

Whichever, these local elections will be the first measure of whether voters are appeased or still deeply displeased with the Labour council.

The Conservatives will obviously be targeting a second seat in Kings Hedges (despite their surge in next door Arbury they

are quite some way adrift there still). Cherry Hinton on the other side of the city will also be fancied for a gain - after all, if they can perform so well in as dreadful a year as 2023, why not also in 2024? They may also, depending on their organisational capacity, try to bring next door Coleridge closer into play.

They might be helped by the fact that, because Cambridge's so called "progressive" vote is pretty large and split across three parties, there aren't any wards that produce absolutely massive Labour votes. No councillor won more than half the votes in 2023 and five won with less than 40%. In other words, the Conservatives don't need a massive vote to gain seats: they just need non-Tory votes spread across Lib Dems and Greens, not aligned behind Labour.

This degree of competition also puts seats in play for other parties. In 2023 the Greens won their first seat in Newnham ward - which now has councillors from Labour and Lib Dem as well. The seat up this year is Lib Dem. **Castle, Market, East Chesterton** and **Trumpington** all have the potential, to varying degrees, to be a bun-fight. The likelihood is that Labour's majority will slip further, though probably not disappear entirely.

Cannock Chase

Current council

18 Con, 17 Lab, 5 Grn, 1 Ind

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

When Amanda Milling stacked up a near-20,000 majority in Cannock Chase at the 2019 general election it seemed that the days of this being a marginal constituency and council (the boundaries are coterminous), let alone a reliably Labour seat, were over.

Partly due to Brexit but also the disappearance of the county's coal-mining generation and one of the earlier examples of Labour's metropolitan values grating with their once core vote, Staffordshire had become a disaster area for the party - they won not a single constituency here in 2019.

Following suit, the Conservatives gained a majority on Cannock Chase council in 2021 - their first ever, sweeping all but one of the seats up for election - and solidified it in 2022. But then the Conservative calamity of 2023 hit, their majority was stripped from them by voters (just) and Labour won the popular vote 44% to 35%.

Of course, even this win demonstrates how far Cannock Chase has moved from Labour: if we go back to 1996, the

similar year prior to the 1997 general election, Labour crushed the Tories 66% to 23%, a 43% lead rather than 9%.

This year the whole of the council is up for election and the Conservatives have a chance of retaking control; Labour and Greens, and perhaps Lib Dems have a chance of pushing them back further from power.

The Local Government Boundary Commission is being firm nowadays, insisting that councils that elect by thirds have uniform 3-member wards - none of this off-year hiatus for 2-councillor wards. Hence, Cannock's wards have changed a fair bit and five seats have been abolished: there will be 36 from now on, so 19 are needed for a majority.

The Conservatives can always count on **Cannock Park and Old Fallow** - the old Cannock West. On the 2023 results they'd have also won **Etching Hill and The Heath, Hawks Green and Rumer Hill** (Hawks Green) and **Western Springs** (though this one's been quite heavily redrawn).

That's twelve seats. So, on top of those twelve seats above, the Conservatives would expect to win **Heath Hayes and Wimblebury** and Rugeley's **Hagley** ward. That's eighteen likely Conservative seats. Then they skirmish with Labour and



Cannock Chase

the Greens throughout most of the rest of the district.

In an even year Labour start as favourites in the other Cannock wards, though there are now only two: **Cannock Longford and Bridgtown** (Cannock South) and **Chadsmoor** (Cannock North and half of Cannock East).

Norton Caines: the south end of the district - still leans Labour and they won here with 67% last year. So nine seats Labour should win given this is a better than even year for the party.

The Greens are competitive across the centre of the district. They should win **Hednesford Hills and Rawnsley**, and **Hednesford Pye Green** for six seats.

Finally, there is Rugeley's **Brereton and Ravenhill** ward, historically the best Lib Dem ward in Cannock Chase. The party won a seat here as recently as 2022 but their councillor now sits as an independent, alongside a Labour and a Conservative representative. So any party could win here: it's a toss up.

But you can see that the boundary changes have shifted things somewhat towards the Conservatives. They should be favoured in exactly half the seats and, if they can hold their seat in Brereton there's their majority. All five abolished seats

seem to be Labour-held: they fall from seventeen to maybe ten or eleven.

Castle Point

Current council

16 PIP, 15 CIIP, 9 Con, 1 vac

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

Castle Point could see the obliteration of the Conservatives this year. In 2023 they hung on to just one ward: St James's, albeit quite comfortably.

But the Tories have been routed. In 2018 they had a majority of thirteen; now they have just nine seats and, at best, just three are safe. Worse, boundary changes bring all-out elections this year and that means all nine could be taken out.

The Conservatives' woes are largely derived from the council's attempts to meet housing targets which residents strongly opposed and prompted organised independents to stand against them, very successfully.

Canvey Island has, for quite a while, had a strong Independent Party (CIIP): they hold all bar one of the island's council seats. But Canvey Island has only sixteen of the borough's 41 seats so however much it wants

independents, or independence, it doesn't command the votes to make a difference. And the island loses two seats in the boundary changes: it's likely that one of them is the Tory seat.

But with the breakthrough of the so-called "People's Independent Party" on the mainland, this is now an independent-controlled council. And it's a big majority too: 22 seats.

It may be that, now the Conservatives have been removed from power, 2023 represents rock bottom for them and they'll end up either holding what they have now, or gaining a few. But this is the less likely option: strongly Leave voting estuarine Essex is going to be towards the less-impressed end of the spectrum with the Sunak brand of Conservatism. Voters are also likely to grant the independents more of a chance in power than a single year, even were they to have forgotten why they booted the Tories out (which they won't have).

The only ward the Conservatives held last year is what is now going to be called **Hadleigh St James**. They still hold seats in **Appleton** (which they only lost by 39 last year), **Boyce** (the new **Thundersley South**), **St George's**, and St Peter's (**Thundersley North**),

plus the aforementioned seat in **Canvey Island West**.

One of the reasons independents have swept Castle Point is because there is no longer any party competition here. While this is historically a very strong Conservative area, Labour has been able to win control in years gone by. They even won the parliamentary seat in 1997. But then their vote collapsed, UKIP briefly surged (Conservative MP Bob Spink even defected to them), and now it's independent.

There's no centre vote here, nor is it an area that might be receptive to left-wing Green politics. Some areas - see Cambridge for example, are competitive because they are vibrant, multi-party politics. Here the opposite is true: there is just one credible alternative to the Tories and that enables independents to outvote them - for now, at least.

Cheltenham

Current council

30 LD, 5 Con, 2 PAB, 2 Grn, 1 Ind

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

From a council - Castle Point - which the Lib Dems barely contest (and when they do get derisory votes) to one where they control almost everything.

The result for the Conservatives is almost certainly going to be the same: obliteration, or as close to it as makes little difference. There are only five Conservative councillors currently in Cheltenham and all of them are up for election following (fairly minor) boundary changes.

The five come from **Battledown** (which they won by 108 votes in 2022), **Lansdown** (168 in 2021), **Leckhampton** (279 in 2021), **Park** (309 in 2021) and **Pittville** (225 in 2021).

All of these Tory wards are split with the Lib Dems: all of them are highly vulnerable. The Conservatives won just one seat the last time the council held elections in 2022; across the borough, Lib Dems outpolled Conservatives 55% to 28%. With such lopsided numbers it's more a question of how evenly-spread the Lib Dem wave is - and their vote is wide enough and deep enough to win the vast majority.

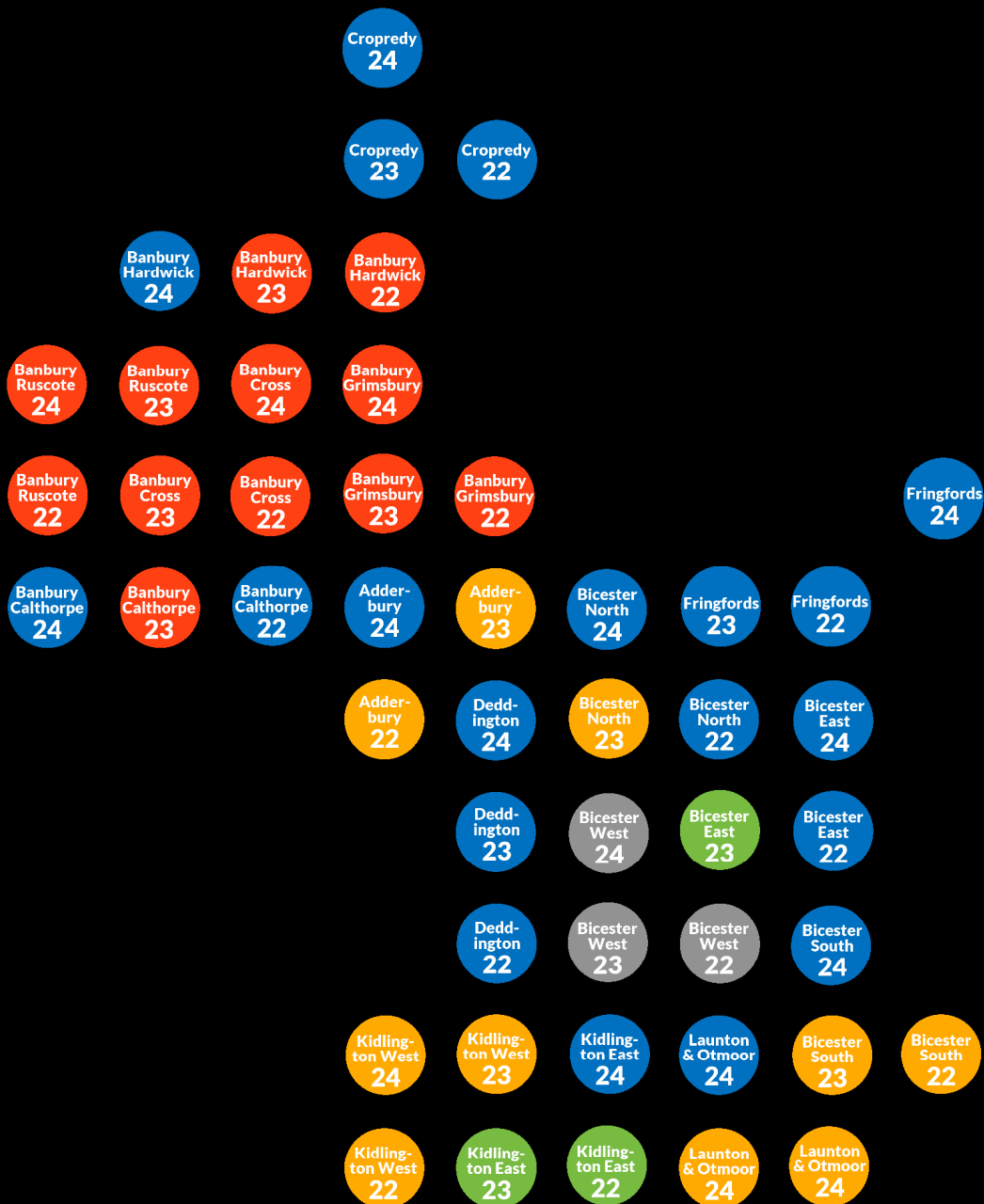
There are five other councillors: two in **Prestbury** from People Against Bureaucracy (PAB), two Greens (one elected in **St Paul's**, one a Lib Dem defector in **Hesters Way**) and a further ex LD independent.

There are no obvious Green targets but the nature of recent Green Party success across southern England often means there doesn't have to be: the

seat they gained in St Paul's, for example, they gained 28 percentage points (though with Labour and PAB not contesting the ward). They pop up wherever they campaign and there is a local mood for a change, whichever party is in control.

With the Conservatives not likely to be much of a factor, will Cheltenham voters seek a larger Green opposition? The Greens are strong in Gloucester-shire and in such an affluent, progressive-liberal electorate, there is no reason why somewhere like Stroud or Bristol should have significant Green Party groups but Cheltenham should not.

Lib Dem control of Cheltenham isn't in doubt. Only the scale of their win is.



Cherwell

Current council
20 Con, 12 Lab, 10 LD, 3 Grn,
3 Ind
Seats up
11 Con, 3 Lab, 1 LD, 1 Ind

Cherwell - north Oxfordshire centred on Banbury and Bicester - is another council where the Conservatives did especially well in 2021, the last time these seats were up, and are likely not to this time around.

More than half the Conservative council seats are up for election this year when one third of their group would be six or seven.

If results are remotely like last year's, the Tories could lose as many as eight of their eleven councillors. Just three rural wards stayed loyal to the party in 2023: **Cropredy, Sibfords and Wroxton, Deddington and Fringfords and Heyfords.**

Just a third of voters backed the Conservatives last year; Labour was essentially level with them in the wards comprising the Banbury constituency, and the Lib Dems were essentially level in those comprising the new Bicester and Woodstock constituency.

Here are some examples of how volatile local elections. In 2021, the Conservatives won **Banbury Calthorpe and Easington** ward (the seat up this year) 56% to 24%. Last year Labour won it 43% to 37%.

The Tories won **Banbury Hardwick** 48% to 34% in 2021; Labour won it 46% to 41% last year.

In 2021 **Bicester East** elected a Conservative over the Greens, 49% to 23%. The Greens won this ward 42% to 38% in 2023.

The seat up for election this year in **Bicester North and Caversfield** voted 53%

Conservative to 12% Lib Dem in 2019. The Lib Dems won it 40% to 33% last year.

And whereas the Tories won Kidlington East 51% to 35% in 2021, the Greens won it 57% to 26% last year.

With the exception of Banbury Hardwick the Conservatives have little chance of holding any of these 2021 seats.

This is the problem the Conservatives face in Banbury: they are the only party with support right across the district. But they face different opponents in different places and, when they're in trouble differently, those opponents gain votes quite swiftly.

So Labour now dominates Banbury, while Lib Dems are strong in the couple of wards that are (for now) part of their Oxford West and Abingdon stronghold, and Independents and Greens jostle in Bicester.

If the Conservatives do as badly this year as they did last, they will be reduced to their smallest council group ever. They hung on to sixteen seats in 1996, and started off with just fourteen in 1973 (when independents were a much stronger force here). These sorts of results are why Labour is looking hard at unseating Attorney General Victoria Prentice at the looming general election.

Chorley

**Current council 37 Lab, 5 Con
Seats up 11 Lab, 3 Con**

Chorley has swung over thirty years from a Conservative-leaning marginal to a pretty safe Labour district. The Tories had an overall majority here as recently as 2010: now they're down to just five councillors.

The Conservatives held just one seat (of fourteen) last year: **Croston, Mawdesley and Euxton South.** That means their incumbents in **Buckshaw and Whittle** (Labour won here by 60% to 32% in 2023), and **Clayton East, Brindle & Houghton** (52% to 36%) are in real peril this year.

There are still plenty of Conservative votes in Chorley: in most wards they easily poll over 30%; it's just that this is very much a two-party district and Labour's vote is much deeper; between 50% and 60% in most wards.

There isn't much point in talking about Conservative offensive targets in Chorley at the moment - not until this intense period of national unpopularity eases. The closest they came last year was in **Eccleston, Heskin and Charnock Richard,** but that was a loss to Labour with an incumbent Tory councillor easily ousted.

Colchester

**Current council
19 Con, 16 LD, 14 Lab, 2 Grn
Seats up
7 Con, 5 LD, 4 Lab, 1 Grn**

If Colchester district encompassed just the Roman capital of England it'd be a three party contest: those parties being Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green.

Of the nineteen Conservative councillors, just four represent wholly Colchester city wards: **Prettygate** and **Stanway** (this ward shared with two Lib Dem councillors, at least till May). Fifteen of them represent rural North Essex wards stretching from **Pyefleet** and **Tiptree** in the south to the Constable country along the boundary with Suffolk.

That last seat in Stanway is probably the only Conservative vulnerability this year: they're defending a majority of 173 but the Lib Dems won last year by 677.

The Lib Dems came very close in Prettygate last year: just 22 votes. And a persistent independent, Professor John Akker of Essex University came 250 votes close in **Mersea and Pyefleet,** but that was still 8% short. But all the other Conservative seats are much safer and, if they held them in atrocious 2023, they have some

reason to believe they'll hold on in 2024.

There are more interesting Lib Dem- Labour battles. Until 2022 the north Colchester ward of **Highwoods** was held by a family of independent councillors (the Oxfords). But when one stood down, the other two quit in a double by-election with the seats splitting one Labour, one Lib Dem. The seat up this year is another Lib Dem and they should start as favourites given they beat Labour easily last May: 47% to 33%.

Labour is also pushing hard to take **Shrub End** (South West Colchester) from the Lib Dems. They were 115 short last year, though when this seat was up in 2021 it was the Conservatives who nearly won it.

The Dickensian-feeling ward of **Wivenhoe**, which also houses much of the University of Essex halls of residence ebbs and flows between safe Lib Dem and competitive with Labour. The Lib Dems won the seat up this year in 2021 38% to 32%, but last year won a landslide: 74% to 12%. So it probably won't switch this year, especially as the ward's in safe Harwich and North Essex rather than three-way marginal Colchester.

Greens broke through in the central Colchester ward of **Castle** five years ago and are dug-in there, but aren't remotely close anywhere else.

That doesn't completely exclude a breakthrough some-where unexpected but it's unlikely given how hard the other parties are fighting across Colchester.

Coventry

Current council
37 Lab, 15 Con, 2 Grn
Seats up
12 Lab, 6 Con

Labour has a fairly strong grip on Coventry council: their majority is currently twenty seats. But things aren't quite as secure for them as that number suggests. Aside from the fact they came perilously close to losing two of the three parliamentary seats in 2019, the Greens and a new party - Coventry Citizens - are pushing hard to establish themselves.

The Conservatives have a set of wards across the south and west of the city in which they are competitive. They haven't been able to win them all at the same time: it's somewhat like Whack-a-Mole.

Labour is likely to lose its last seat in **Holbrook** to the Greens, though this is by no means certain: they only sneaked last year's seat by 79 votes.

Coventry Citizens polled most strongly in **Binley and Willenhall** on the eastern edge

of the city, but they were still 410 votes adrift there last year.

Elsewhere they weren't competitive but kudos to them for being sufficiently organised to contest fourteen seats: no mean feat for a small, new, local party.

The Conservative seat most vulnerable is their surprise gain of **Sherborne** in 2021 when their vote surged by twenty-one points. They won by ninety-nine votes. But like in Holbrook, the Tories weren't all that far off (21 votes) winning a second seat last year so if the incumbent stands again his personal vote could hold it.

The other Tory-won seats in 2021 were in wards they have a longer track record of winning: **Bablake, Cheylesmore, Wainbody** and **Westwood**, and they won them pretty comfortably, but not massively, in 2021.

If the Conservatives are doing significantly better than last year, or the last five elections, they might pull off a result in **Earlsdon** ward, but this is quite a heavily student ward and Labour has worked hard to make sure students turn out.

Coventry swung quite heavily away from Labour when the party was last in government - to the extent that the Tories briefly had a majority on the council. Labour is structurally a lot weaker in Coventry since then: it's just hidden by the

party being in opposition nationally. But this structural weakness will reassert itself when they're in government again,

Crawley

Current **20 Lab, 16 Con**
Seats up **7 Con, 5 Lab**

Crawley is a key marginal constituency and the borough council (coterminous with the parliamentary seat) replicates this closeness. Labour currently has a majority of four seats - and this is a princely sum for Crawley. The odds are that they'll expand this majority a little this time because, as discussed in other council previews, the Conservatives did a lot better in 2021 when these seats were last fought.

There are three especially vulnerable Conservative seats: **Southgate** (70 vote majority), **Ifield** (222) and **Gossops Green and North East Broadfield** (277). These are all Tory seats in otherwise Labour wards.

But last year's elections were so awful for the Conservatives that they lost **Pound Hill North and Forge Wood** which had only previously voted Labour once: in 1995 at the peak of the Blair Labour wave prior to the 1997 general election. There was a near 22% swing to Labour in this affluent suburban ward.

They also came close in **Tilgate** and, slightly more distantly, **Pound Hill South and Worth**, leaving only **Maidenbower** as safe - but again, if the Tories can hold these wards in a year like 2023 they have a decent chance of holding them in 2024.

We've covered a lot of councils already which I've suggested Labour will struggle to hold if they get back into government and Crawley is another - indeed it will be near the top of the queue. But Labour isn't in government and it's the Conservatives who have to deal with the weight of that burden in these local elections.

Dorset

Current council

42 Con, 27 LD, 5 Grn, 2 Lab,

5 Oth. 1 vac

Seats up All

The entire county of Dorset bar Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) is now a unitary council with wards based on the old county council divisions. Dorset and BCP were established in the same year - 2019, but for some reason BCP elected last year while Dorset councillors got a five year term.

The Conservatives are almost certain to lose control of Dorset because, while they were by far the largest party in 2019, overall they were just ten seats

clear of all others. That means they can only afford to lose five and they'll lose more than that.

This is a massive county, stretching from Lyme Regis to not far off Ringwood, and the Portland peninsula to Shaftesbury.

Five districts were abolished to create this unitary authority but, because a council of this size is not homogenous, it's worth looking at the battle within these ex-districts.

East Dorset, essentially covering the villages and small towns north of Bournemouth like Wimborne Minster and Colehill, plus more outlying towns like Verwood, has thirteen Conservative and five Lib Dem councillors.

There are actually more defensive Lib Dem seats here than Conservatives, **Corfe Mullen**, is split between the two parties while the Lib Dems just edged **Cranborne and Alderholt** (1.3% majority) and Colehill and Wimborne Minster East (3.3%).

The next most marginal ward is Conservative: **Ferndown South** with a near 7% majority but that was over UKIP, which polled 23%.

The Lib Dems weren't too far behind in third place so the outcome here will depend where the UKIP vote transfers.

All the remaining seats in this corner of Dorset have much larger majorities, over 20%.

Purbeck, which covers the south coast of Dorset below Poole between Swanage and Weymouth, is more evenly contested. **Lytchett Matravers and Upton** split last time 2 Lib Dem and 1 Tory. **South East Purbeck** and **West Purbeck** were both narrowly won by the Conservatives but over independents. **Swanage** could produce a Labour win, though the town's two Conservative councillors won by just over twenty percentage points. **Crossways** and **Wareham** are both Lib Dem wards with comfortable majorities. Weymouth and Portland was one of the most volatile, pluralistic districts up until its abolition, and this is reflected in its current split of councillors: five Lib Dems, three Greens, two Labour, two Conservatives and two Independents.

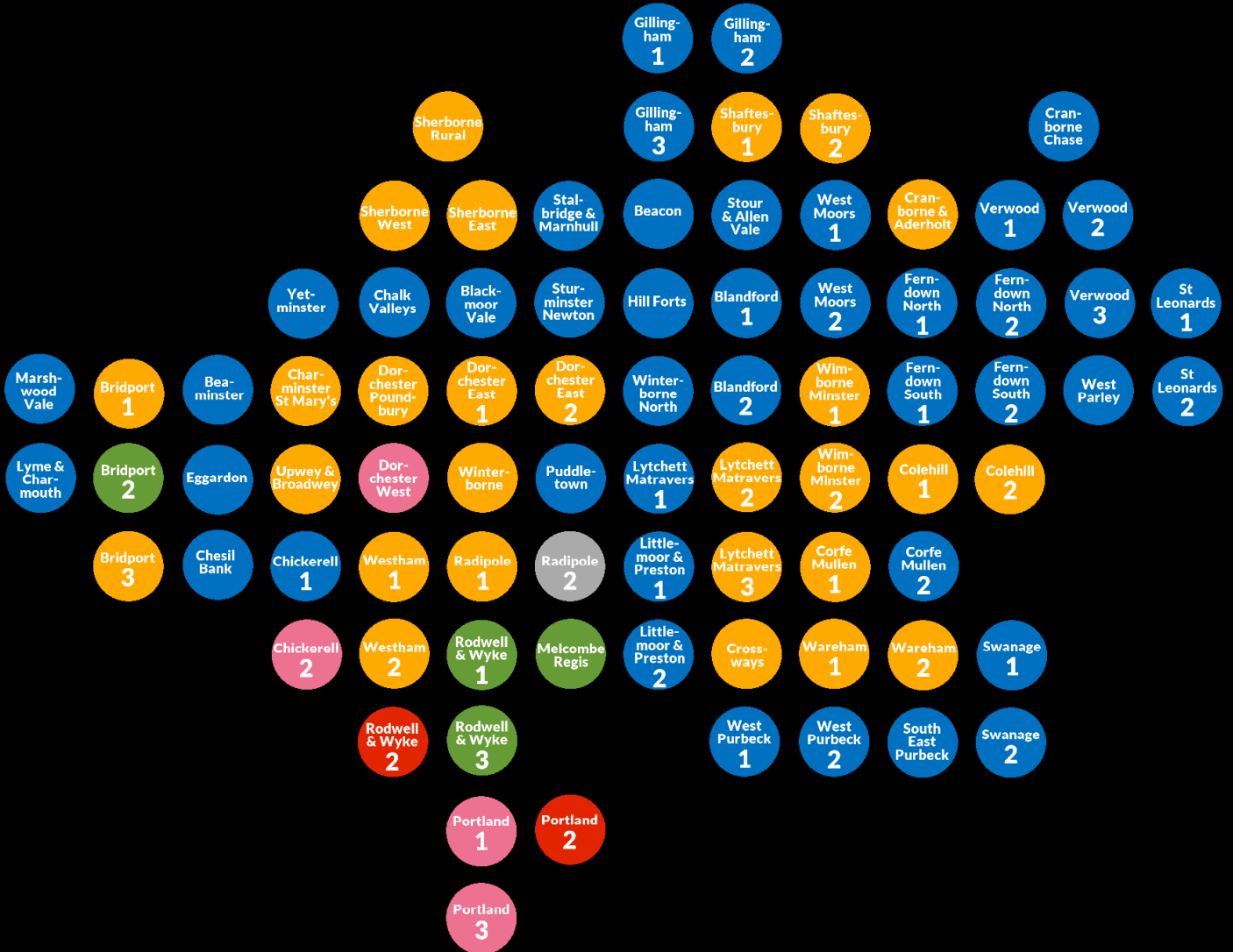
Two wards here: **Portland** and **Rodwell and Wyke**, are split. The Lib Dems snatched **Upwey and Broadwey** by just 1.2% over the Conservatives, while the Tories are vulnerable in **Littlemoor and Preston**, with just a 7.4% majority. **Westham** (2 Lib Dem) and **Melcombe Regis** (1 Green) are safe. One local political issue to watch here is for any backlash against the mooring of the Bibby Stockholm immigrant barge in Portland Harbour.

West Dorset offers potentially the most Conservative targets. The adjoining wards of **Chickerell** and **Chesil Bank** have two Tory councillors with small majorities over, respectively, an independent and a Green. **Marshwood Vale, Lyme and Charmouth** and **Beaminster** are three Conservative seats with slightly larger majorities of around 10%. **Yetminster** and **Sherborne Rural** probably represent the upper range of Conservative vulnerability with majorities just shy of twenty points; though if the Greens are to pull off one of their huge advances, watch **Eggardon** with its 24.3% majority.

Finally, North Dorset which should be the strongest Conservative part of the county. There are just two Lib Dem councillors here in the picture postcard town of **Shaftesbury**.

The large **Gillingham** ward that surrounds the town has three Conservative councillors about nine percentage points ahead of the Lib Dems. And in **Sturminster Newton** they were just four points ahead of an independent last time.

At the outer end of competitiveness, **Winterborne North** and **Stalbridge and Marnhull** might be at risk.



Dorset

Dudley

Current council

41 Con, 26 Lab, 4 Ind, 1 LD

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

Dudley could be this year's Amber Valley - that is, a strongly-Leave voting district where the Conservatives had built up a big majority over three rounds of annual elections but which could be swept away because of all-out elections.

It could happen but, unlike in Amber Valley, the Conservative vote held up somewhat in Dudley last year: Labour and the Conservatives both polled 43% and won twelve seats apiece. The Tories retained a comfortable majority of sixteen. The reason the Tories kept their twelve seat majority was because of the landslide they won in 2021: 21 Conservatives were elected, just three Labour.

The boundary changes here are so minor as to need a microscope to spot but they still require all 72 seats to be elected this year. On the basis of 2023's result the council will split 36 Conservative and 36 Labour. But that probably won't happen.

One reason is that in an August 2023 by-election the Lib Dems gained a seat in **Cradley and Wollescote** - towns between Halesowen and Stourbridge that have gradually closed the

gap between the two larger neighbourhoods. They have the chance to turn that one into three in that ward, which will cost the Tories one seat and Labour a second.

The Conservatives should be able to count on **Amblecote, Belle Vale, Gornal, Halesowen South, Hayley Green and Cradley South, Kingswinford North and Wall Heath, Kingswinford South, Norton, Pedmore and Stourbridge East, Sedgley and Wordsley North** for 36 seats.

Labour won **Coseley East, Castle and Priory** and **St Thomas's** in their meltdown 2021, but they can usually also count on **Halesowen North, Lye and Stourbridge North, Netherton and Holly Hall, Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood, Upper Gornal and Woodsetton**, and probably **Brockmoor and Pensnett** and **Wollaston and Stourbridge Town** - thirty seats.

Brierley Hill and Wordsley South and **St James** are toss-ups: both should be Labour but the Tories actually gained Brierley Hill last year, at the depth of their national unpopularity. Labour got revenge by regaining a seat in St James in a by-election.

The Lib Dems, as well as gaining all three seats in **Cradley North and Wollescote**, are also targeting the wards to the west:

Lye and Stourbridge North, and Pedmore and Stourbridge East. Lye is Labour-held, Pedmore is quite safely Tory. This may be overreach for them: the Lib Dems polled just 7.5% in both, though they surged 33 percentage points last year to make Cradley and Wollescote competitive prior to the by-election.

In other words, the Conservatives are very close to retaining a majority but whether they succeed is going to be touch and go - decided by a couple of toss-up wards and by the effectiveness of the Lib Dems. And, of course, it's highly likely that some wards will split, so the result could be anything from Conservatives falling just short to a majority of up to a dozen, maybe.

Eastleigh

Current 35 LD, 3 Ind, 1 Con

Seats up 10 LD, 1 Ind, 1 Con

The Conservatives will probably be wiped off Eastleigh council this year as their last surviving councillor, in **Fair Oak and Horton Heath**, is up for the guillotine (or election, if you prefer). That will leave three independents as the only opposition to a massive Lib Dem phalanx.

And yet, putting aside the pesky detail of them not winning a

single seat last year, the Tories didn't do so badly - and the Lib Dems not so well.

The Lib Dem vote fell in seven wards (by as much as 7.6 points in **Bishopstoke**), the Tory vote rose in eleven (by as much as fourteen points in Eastleigh North). It just happened that most Conservative increases came in wards they were far distant in, while their setbacks came in wards in which they have been more competitive like Hilingbury.

But there really aren't that many competitive wards in Eastleigh - for any party. The Lib Dems have run this borough, that curls around the north and east of Southampton, without a break for the past thirty years. The Conservatives seldom poll above 30% - haven't since 1994 and last year managed 24% to the Lib Dems' 51%.

With First Past The Post, a 51% share, provided it is evenly distributed, is going to win a party every, or almost every seat. And that's what happens in Eastleigh, year-in, year-out.

It's not just a problem the Conservatives can't crack. For years Labour has come close, but never managed to win, **Eastleigh Central**. They were 169 votes short last year after quite a big swing their way.

Labour used to have a sizeable councillor group: Eastleigh is a

major railway town and Central and **Eastleigh South** were their core council seats, but was also able to win wards like **Bishopstoke, Chandlers Ford** and, occasionally, **Hamble and Netley**. There are nowadays no Labour targets beyond Eastleigh Central: the Lib Dems long annexed their vote and non-Tories now quite contentedly line up behind the centre party.

If we go back to the relatively good year for the Tories rather than dreadful 2023, then the picture was slightly better. The Tories were just 116 votes short in **Botley**, 109 in **Hiltingbury** and under 300 in four other

wards. But those were still all losses in as good a year as the Tories will ever see while in government.

Lib Dems can sometimes suddenly collapse after long

periods administering local councils - look at Adur for example (there aren't many examples of long-run Lib Dem councils across England!)

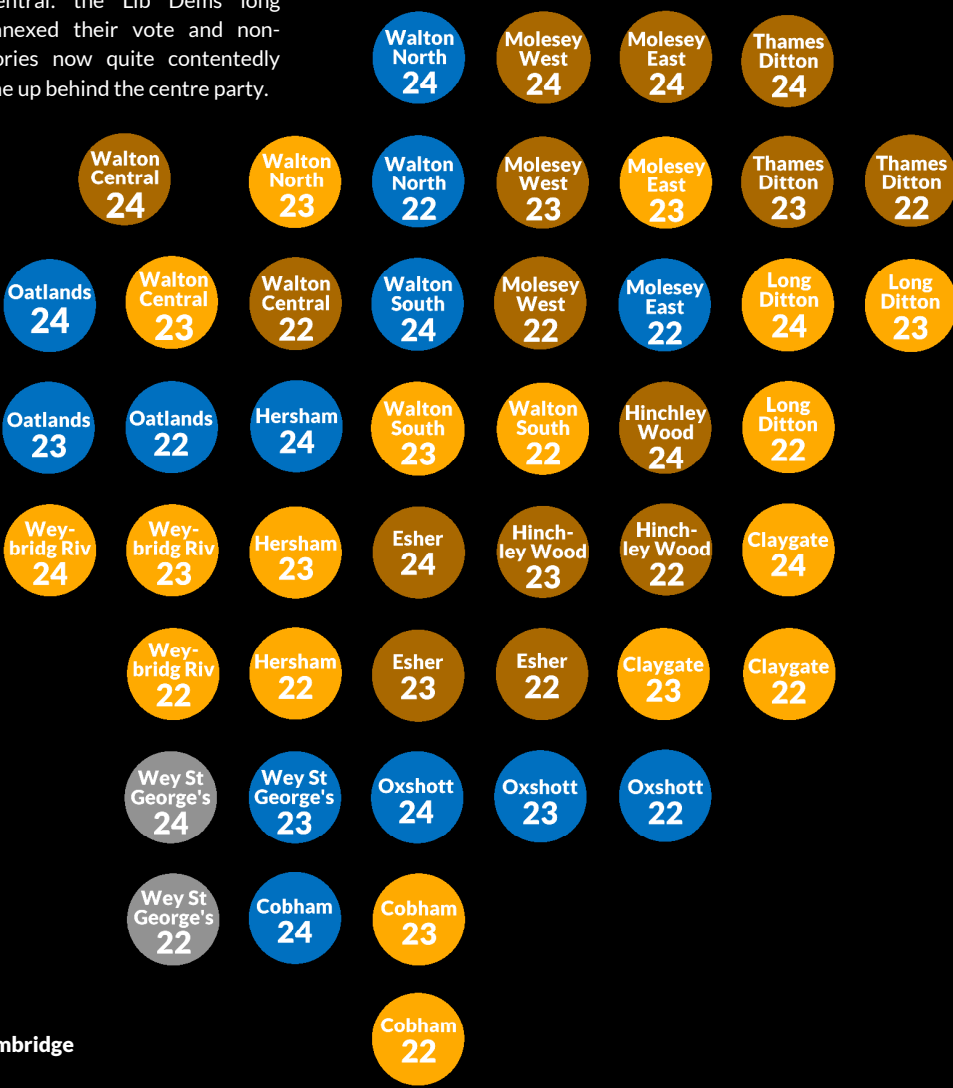
But there is no sign of any collapse here and this will remain one of their safest fiefdoms: up there with Cheltenham, Sutton and Oadby and Wigston.

Elmbridge

Current council
20 LD, 16 Res, 12 Con
Seats up
7 Res, 6 Con, 3 LD

If the Lib Dems can gain as many seats this year as they did in 2023 (six) they will win an overall majority in Elmbridge for the first time. This collection of affluent commuter- and stock-broker-belt towns and villages across the Thames from Hampton like Walton, Molesey, Weybridge and Esher comprise what was once one of the very safest Tory constituencies.

The district council, meanwhile, has traditionally been a battle between Conservatives and Residents Associations or Amenity Societies, with a decent but distant Labour presence. But since the EU referendum, and the way the Conservative Party has reacted to it, this strongly Remain-supporting area has started



Elmbridge

swinging to the Lib Dems, also-rans here until that point.

The Conservative troubles have been made considerably worse by the local MP for most of the borough being Dominic Raab - one of the most prominent Brexiteers and a lightning rod for the fury of local Remainers.

In fact there has not been that much impact on the Conservative vote in Elmbridge by Brexit: it's down some but nothing exceptional for a party in power nationally for thirteen years.

No, the Lib Dems are breaking through by breaking down the Residents' Association support. In fact it's a little more complex than that because the RAs and Lib Dems are clearly standing aside for each other in most wards. In just five wards last year did the two sides stand against each other.

This exacerbated Conservative losses because there was no split opposition through which Tory candidates can win. So, for example, in **Cobham and Downside** the Tories were down just four percentage points but the winning Lib Dem surged eighteen points. The Lib Dems didn't contest **Hersham** in 2019 but won the ward in 2023 with 47%. There was no Lib Dem in **St George's Hill**, enabling an independent to win 49% to 39%.

Where the residents fought the Lib Dems the Lib Dems won. There was a 25% swing in **Molesey East** and the Walton Society vote fell 25.6 points in Walton Central. But it was the Conservatives who were hit hardest by the Lib Dem surge.

As usual the Conservatives did much better in 2021 - the last time the seats up this year were contested - than in later years. Then there were 22 Tories and just 9 Lib Dems on the council.

The top Lib Dem targets are going to be exactly the same wards they gained last year: **Cobham and Downside, Hersham Village, Walton North and Walton South** from the Conservatives, and **Molesey East** and **Walton Central** from the residents' group. The Lib Dems were not so far off in Oatlands and Burwood Park but **Oxshott and Stoke D'Abergnon** remained secure.

The Conservatives aren't too far adrift in **Weybridge St George's Hill** and **Molesey West** - but with the Lib Dems standing aside in these wards it'll be incredibly hard for the Tories to win given their national circumstances and the specific problems in this heavily Remain district.

Surrey, once regarded as one of the strongest Conservative counties in England, is now becoming a nightmare for them. They hold a majority in just one

district: Reigate and Banstead, and are in all sorts of trouble here, in Woking, in Mole Valley and Tandridge.

Epping Forest

Current council

35 Con, 13 Res, 6 LD, 2 Grn, 2 Ind

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

Epping Forest has had, up until now, one of the more complex electoral timetables of any council: eleven single councillor wards, sixteen two-councillors and five three-councillors.

All this has been swept away in radical boundary changes. There are now eighteen three-councillor wards and, as with all ward boundary reviews, all 54 councillors are up for election this year. Does this all-out election create a chance to oust the Conservatives from control of another council?

Obviously that's a greater risk this year than when only a third of the council is up for election. But this is a very stubbornly Conservative district.

There are now to be twelve seats covering Loughton. The town's residents' association will win eleven or maybe all twelve seats depending on whether independent Stephen Murray (the former Labour son

of Len Murray, the former TUC general secretary) continues to stand in **Loughton Roding**.

His problem, though, is that Loughton Roding is heavily redrawn: half of it goes into Buckhurst Hill East. But let's assume he still wins the redrawn Roding, along with two other RA candidates.

Whichever it is, the Tories are unlikely to win any: the RA polled over 60% in every ward and Murray won over 80% in his.

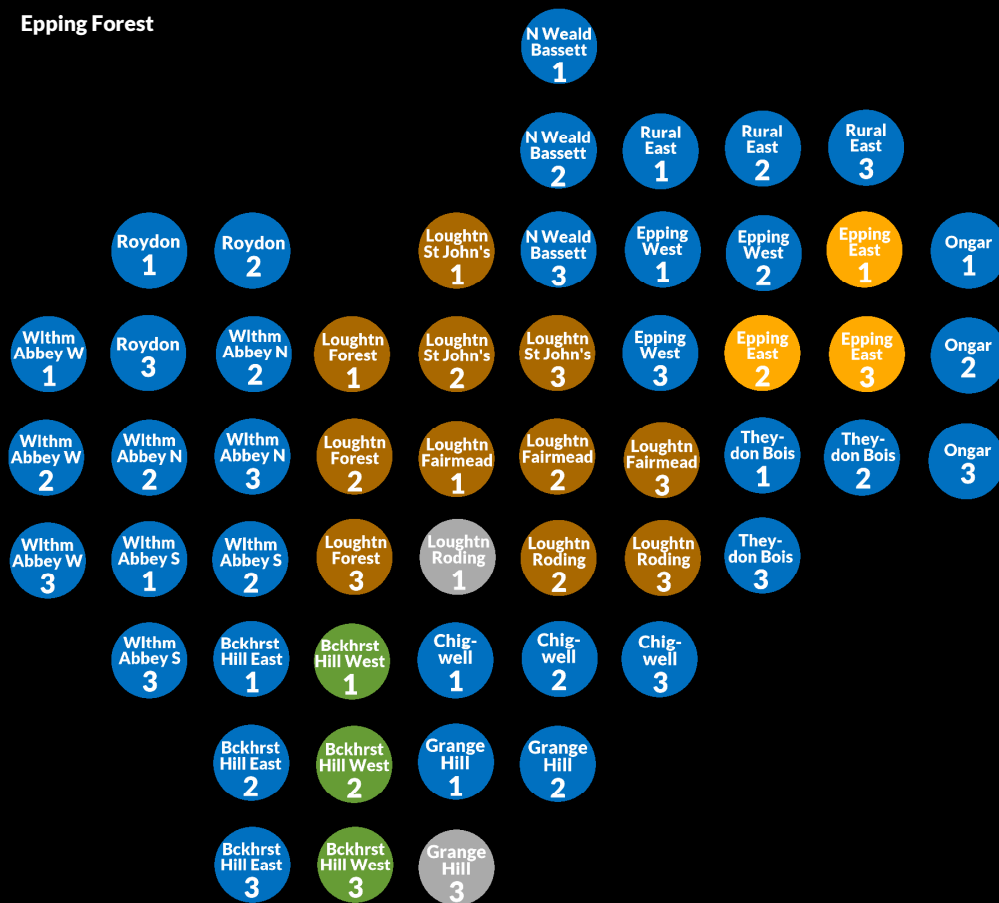
The Lib Dems should win **Epping East** (the old Epping Hemnall) but they may struggle to hold their seat in **Theydon Bois**, which has been merged with Passingford and Lamborne wards, which are strongly Tory,

The other Lib Dem at risk is in **Lower Sheering** in the far north of the district beyond Harlow.

As with Theydon Bois the ward's been consumed in a much larger division: Rural East, which includes parts of four other Tory wards. The other seat in Lower Sheering is also Tory. So it's hard to forecast more than three Lib Dems.

The Green Party has a reasonable grip on **Buckhurst Hill East**, currently a two-councillor ward, and so will be favourites to gain the third.

Epping Forest



Finally, in terms of the non-Tory councillors, an independent gained a seat in Grange Hill, a three member ward near the end of the Central Line. This ward has only minor boundary changes so there's a decent chance they can survive this year.

That adds up to nineteen non-Conservative councillors at a

minimum. Four seats are being abolished, so that leaves 35 Conservatives, the same as now: a majority of sixteen.

There are only a couple of vulnerabilities in the wall of Conservative wards. Labour came quite close last year in Waltham Abbey South West - renamed **Waltham Abbey West**.

And Labour used to win the Ongar ward of Shelley, which has now been subsumed into a wider 3-member **Ongar** ward. This will be a harder nut to crack because Labour had no success in the rest of the ward.

Of course it's possible for other parties to bring new wards into play, and a radical redrawing of boundaries can make altered divisions suddenly marginal, but

this isn't likely when the territory is politically similar.

The likelihood is that the Conservatives will retain Epping Forest with a handy majority.

Exeter

Current council

24 Lab, 6 Grn, 4 Con, 3 LD, 2 Ind
Seats up

8 Lab, 2 Con, 2 Ind, 1 Grn

Over the course of thirty years or so, Exeter has swung from a reasonably safe Conservative city to a Labour stronghold with an increasingly aggressive Green opposition.

This is one council where the 2021 results were far better for Labour than the successive rounds of elections in 2022 and 2023.

There are four wards that Labour won in 2021 but not 2023. The Greens won **Heavitree** and **Newtown and St Leonard's**; and the Lib Dems **Duryard and St James** and **St Thomas**. The Greens also moved closer in **Pennsylvania**.

But Labour is still grinding down the Conservative vote in Exeter. They have two out of three seats in the somewhat detached tourist village of **Topsham** down the bank of the Exe, and the likelihood is they'll take the third this year.

That leaves on Conservative ward: **St Loye's**, which isn't very secure either: Labour was 147 votes adrift in 2023. But if the Tories held it last year, they should hold it this year.

There are also two independents, elected as Labour, whose seats are up for election this year in **Pinhoe** and **St Thomas's**. Labour will probably regain them. So while the party could lose four seats, it will likely gain three back. That means Labour's majority will slip from eleven to seven.

Fareham

Current council

24 Con, 4 LD, 3 Ind

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

Is a Titchfield Thunderbolt about to hit the Conservatives in Fareham? Probably not.

Fareham is the second of the councils that elect by halves every even year. Because of boundary changes the whole council is up for election but the changes are not especially radical; one extra councillor but a clear lineage between old and new wards.

Like Adur, Fareham had one 3-councillor ward: Portchester East, which is also the best Lib Dem ward. That's been reduced to a two-councillor ward: **Portchester Castle**, but the Lib

Dems also came very close in Portchester West - now **Portchester Wicor** which contains some overspill from that slimmed-down ward.

The other Lib Dem ward is Fareham East which, again, has been split up. **Fareham Town** is probably the more likely Lib Dem ward straddling the River Wallington. **Wallington and Downend** contains most of Fareham East geographically and it wouldn't be a huge shock if the Lib Dems won this too,

Fareham South, which is barely altered and has been renamed **Fort Fareham**, is the best Labour prospect in the district. They were 124 votes behind in 2022. The other three Fareham town wards are fairly safely Conservative.

Fareham is one half of a district of two distinct halves (though it's perhaps more like thirds). The other big population centre is **Locks Heath** and **Titchfield**: two urban areas that blend into each other.

This end of the district is a lot better for the Conservatives. **Titchfield Common** is split with an independent but everything else votes Tory quite comfortably.

The third, small section of the borough is the Solent coast just beyond Gosport by the mouth of the river Meon. There are two wards here and the Lib Dems have a chance in both.

The best shot for the Lib Dems is **Stubbington**. The Tories gained a seat here in 2022 but they were still only 115 ahead. The Lib Dems were 333 behind in **Hill Head**,

It's very difficult for the Tories to lose Fareham. Even in the opposition parties win all the seats I've suggested short of Hill Head the total only comes to thirteen seats, leaving the Conservatives with nineteen.

Losing Hill Head would hang the council - sixteen apiece - and independents taking both seats in Titchfield Common would make it fifteen Conservative, fourteen Lib Dems, two Labour and two Independents.

Fareham has never been anything other than Conservative of hung. To lose a majority of seventeen would be quite an upset: the 2022 results gave the Tories a twenty point lead over the Lib Dems so for things to change that gap needs to narrow a lot.

Gateshead

Current council

49 Lab, 17 LD

Seats up

17 Lab, 5 LD

The two councils south of the Tyne are a lot more reliable for Labour than Newcastle or North

Tyneside are. This is mainly because they are homogenous working class districts: they lack the university neighbourhoods of Newcastle and the upmarket resort of Whitley Bay.

This is not to say Gateshead is uniform: as well as this major town the borough extends miles to the west covering the pit villages of Blaydon.

Labour has never lost its majority in Gateshead. Its nadir was sixteen seats in 2008 when Labour held 41 seats and Lib Dems 26.

The electoral pattern has been quite sedate for a while now. There are five secure Lib Dem wards: two in Gateshead itself (**Low Fell** and **Pelaw and Heworth**) and three covering the second largest town in the district: Wickham (**Dunston Hill and Whickham East**, **Whickham North**, and **Whickham South and Sunnyside**).

In 2023, they managed to gain two further seats: the outlying town of **Birtley**, next to Washington, and **Saltwell**: the Gateshead town ward immediately north of Low Fell. Both these gains came from huge increases in the Lib Dem vote: up forty points in Birtley and thirty-three in Saltwell. No other wards were the least competitive though the Greens moved to 357 votes shy of Labour in **Crawcrook and Greenside** - one of the wards

the Lib Dems held when Labour was in government.

At the 2019 general election the Conservatives pulled off a fairly close second place in the Blaydon constituency: another former mining seat seemingly losing its antagonism to the party decades on from the last pit closing.

But the Tories have never had a strong base in Gateshead, fourteen seats being (briefly) the height of their success in the late 1970s.

Low Fell and Whickham South were the long-run Tory wards but, as we've seen in so many Metropolitan districts, the Lib Dems managed to win over that vote and eradicate the Conservatives.

It's been 28 years since the Tories had any councillors in Gateshead. They were second in eight wards last year but very distant seconds in all.

Gloucester

Current council

22 Con, 13 LD, 2 Lab, 2 Ind

Seats up All

Gloucester turned fiercely against Labour in the midst of the party's last period in government, and things have just got worse and worse. In 2021 the party was left with just

three seats on the council. That was surely rock bottom for Labour. But progress back up may be difficult.

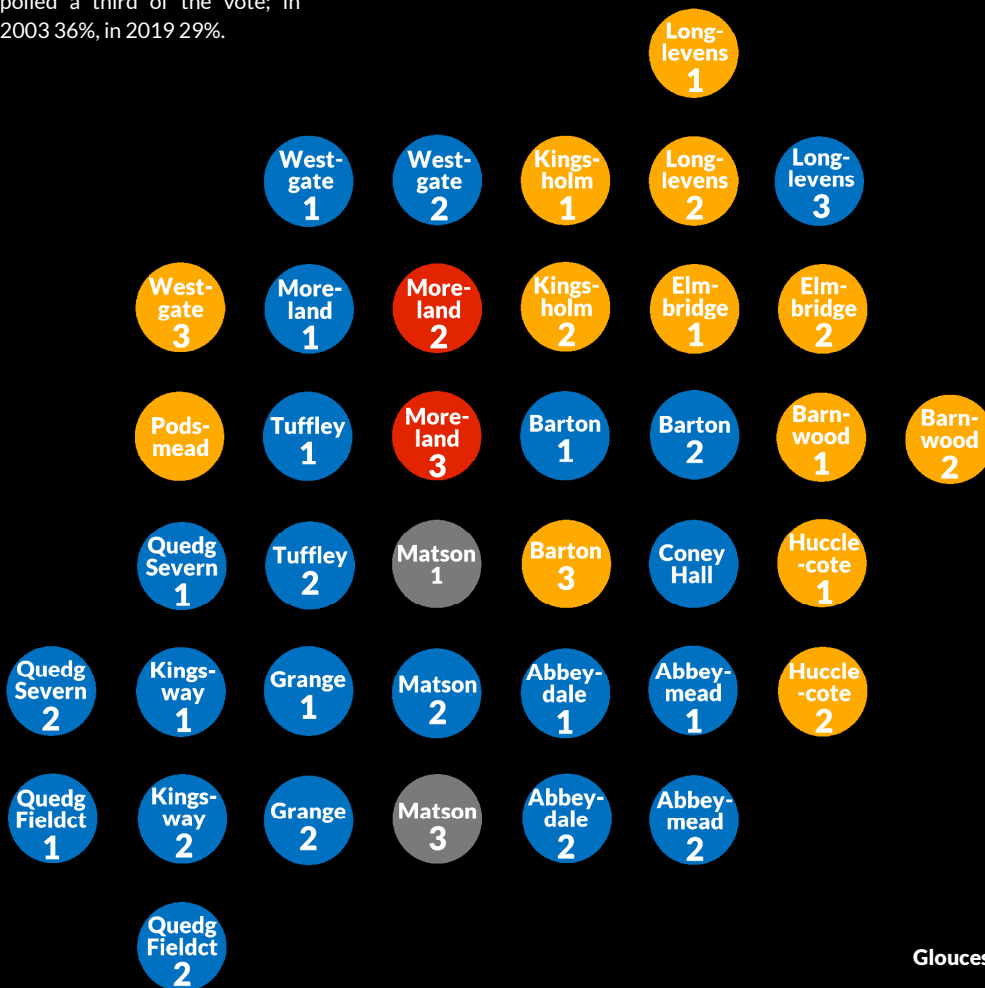
The main reason is that, while the Lib Dems offer no challenge in the parliamentary seat (8% in 2019) they have long been highly competitive at council level. As far back as 1982 they polled a third of the vote; in 2003 36%, in 2019 29%.

But it wasn't a Labour to Lib Dem swing that almost eradicated the party last time: there is just one Labour-Lib Dem battleground: Podsmead.

No, it was a direct swing from Labour to Conservative in a raft of marginal wards. 10.45% in **Barton and Tredworth**, 11.9%

in **Matson and Robinswood**, 13.7% in **Coney Hall**, 7.2% in deep inner city **Moreland** - where the last two Labour councillors serve.

Part of the reason is that Gloucester was a heavily Leave area in the 2016 EU referendum: 59% to 41%.



Gloucester 2

In this context Labour was on the wrong end of that result and it simply added to an impression locally that Labour was not on the side of its vote.

But if the EU result was the reason for Labour's decline, why did the even more pro-EU Lib Dems do well? Again in part this can be put down to the Lib Dems being far better at localising a contest than Labour.

Gloucester Labour is far from being the largest or most well organised party whereas Liberal Democrats have a strong local government base here; in nearby Cheltenham, in the strip of wards between Gloucester and Cheltenham, in Cirencester, in parts of Stroud to the south.

So Labour was hit hard by the national popularity of the Conservatives, the turmoil of the EU referendum and the organisation of the Lib Dems.

Yet despite Labour being almost obliterated, the Conservative majority in Gloucester is small: five seats over all other councillors, and they'll almost certainly lose that majority this May.

There have already been two Lib Dem by-election gains from the Tories in **Longlevens** and **Westgate** wards. And the two Conservative councillors in **Matson**, **Robinswood** and **White City** ward left the group to sit as independents. So the

Conservative majority that started out at thirteen seats has already shrunk to just five.

Labour has also had some trouble. Their only Muslim councillor defected back (he started off with the party) to the Lib Dems over the Gaza conflict in November. One councillor would not normally be too much of a problem but he represented a third of Labour's councillors.

To build their way back, Labour simply has to regain the seat they lost in split **Moreland** ward in 2021. But they were over 200 votes off winning that seat so it's not entirely straightforward.

They will also want to win all three seats in Matson regardless of whether the two ex-Tories there stand and split the vote. They were sixty votes off the third seat last time.

They might also be reasonably confident of not just regaining Lib Dem defector Usman Bhaimia's seat in **Barton and Tredworth** but capturing the other two Tory seats in the ward. But if there is a Gloucester ward that might behave differently because of Gaza it's this one: a heavily Muslim area with three Muslim councillors. It may be that the Lib Dems can take this ward outright, though they only polled 6% in 2021.

Single-member **Podsmead** was gained by the Lib Dems from

Labour last time: Labour's vote crashing thirty-four points to put them third. The Lib Dems finished just thirty votes ahead of the Conservatives. The smaller the ward, the more potentially volatile it is as it takes quite a few voters to have quite a major impact on the result - so Labour should not entirely be counted out here but the Lib Dems will clearly be firm favourites to hold on.

There are two suburban wards which the Conservatives won but by not all that much over Labour. One is **Kingsway**, where the second Tory was just eighty votes ahead of Labour - though this councillor finished miles behind his running mate (possibly because of his Polish name, possibly because he was a new candidate).

The other is **Tuffley**, where Labour was further behind (144 votes) but where there is a history of the party occasionally winning, if rarely.

That's the Labour battleground. But the Lib Dems have plenty of targets too - and a far better track record of winning. Their top targets will be taking the last Tory seat in Longlevens, plus the other two in Westgate: their by-election gains. Then, they only missed out on **Quedgeley Severn Vale** by twenty eight votes last time - there are two seats in that ward. **Quedgeley Fieldcourt** is a much harder nut to crack: they were

277 votes short there but they only fielded one candidate, so clearly didn't target the ward and, besides, the Tories are much less popular this time around.

But there are three affluent middle class wards adjoining their stronghold in the north east of the city: **Abbeymead**, **Abbeydale** and **Coney Hall** with five seats between them. The Tories won the two Abbeys quite comfortably last time but nothing in a city like this is safe when party fortunes have switched so dramatically since 2021.

Coney Hall is a single-member ward newly created in 2016. First time out it went Labour; the Tories won it in 2021 but it's a three-way marginal.

So, there are ten (maybe twelve with Quedgeley Fieldcourt and fourteen with Barton and Tredworth), seats the Lib Dems will be having a pop at, and ten gains would give the Lib Dems a larger majority than the Tories hold right now. And, on top of that, Labour has up to eight target seats. In the worst case scenario, therefore, the Conservatives could fall from controlling the council to having just the third biggest group on it. Gloucester will be one of the more exciting councils to watch on election night.

Gosport

Current council
16 LD, 10 Con, 2 Lab
Seats up
9 LD, 4 Con, 1 Lab

There is a very, very slight chance that the Lib Dems could lose their majority on Gosport council this year. But the Lib Dems are more entrenched than their majority of four suggests.

Gosport held all-out elections in 2022 (this is another biennial council) and the Lib Dems gained control. If you look at the dashboard above, more Lib Dems were elected in second place - i.e. the seat up this year - than the Tories.

There are two split wards: **Lee East** and **Peel Common**, but both winning candidates were significantly ahead of their losing running-mates, so it shouldn't be assumed that these are the easiest pick-ups.

The Lib Dems won by 244 in Lee East and 227 in Peel Common. The best Tory shot - the only one that's really a marginal - is **Rowner and Holbrook**. The lower Lib Dem was only 115 votes ahead last time.

The Conservatives may - just may, and only because the Labour vote is somewhat erratic in Gosport, have a chance at taking the Labour seat in **Harbourside and Town**, where

they are 150 votes behind. This ward nearly always votes Labour and the national environment should block the Tories but they actually won a seat here in 2021 in the ward's previous incarnation.

Labour's best shot seems to be **Grange and Alver Valley**, which was a three-way marginal last time and the Lib Dems probably have the more effective campaigning vehicle. Labour was just sixteen votes behind last time, and the Lib Dems seventy-two.

The Lib Dems will try to expand their majority not just in that ward but also **Alvestoke** where they were 52 votes behind.

Everything else looks pretty nailed down for both principal parties here, though Tories held **Brockmoor and Privett** and **Hardway** until 2022. They lost them by a lot last time but there's a chance in small wards on small councils for a shift of not all that many votes to change outcomes.

Halton

Current council
49 Lab, 3 LD, 2 Con
Seats up
15 Lab, 1 LD, 1 Con

This council has a claim to be one of the safest Labour authorities in the country,

especially now the Greens are making headway in Knowsley.

There are just two non-Labour wards and Labour even broke into the normally Conservative one: **Daresbury, Moore and Sandymoor**, last year. It wasn't even close: Labour 42%, Green 27% and Conservative 26%.

Labour polled a thumping 64.4% borough-wide (not even close to their highest: 75.3% in 1995) with just 17% for the Tories and 10% for the Lib Dems. In two wards Labour won over 80% of the vote; six more with over 70% and a further five over 60%. In just Daresbury (and Lib Dem **Beechwood and Heath**) was the Labour vote below 50%.

Is there any prospect of any other competitive wards in Halton? No. Although strictly part of Cheshire, Halton is very much in the orbit of Merseyside - it's now even part of Liverpool City Region - and it has the overwhelmingly Labour voting habits of most of that region.

A short profile as there's very little to see here. Move along.

Harlow

Current **21 Con, 12 Lab**
Seats up
All - boundary changes

Harlow is an Essex new town that has swung massively from

Labour over the long-run. Brexit turbocharged that process to such an extent that, in the Tories disastrous 2023 local elections, they actually gained a seat here.

On the other hand, 2023 was the first time in four years that Labour won more seats than the Tories: six to five. It's just that it was seven to four the last time those seats were fought.

Boundary changes give Labour the chance to reset things in one fell swoop - but not if they put in a performance as tepid as last year. It seems a long time ago but until 2021

Labour had a majority on Harlow council even as they fell ever further behind in the parliamentary constituency (which includes parts of Epping Forest and, from the next General Election, Uttlesford).

If things pan out broadly as they did in 2023 there should be four reasonably safe Labour wards for twelve seats: **Little Parndon and Town Centre, Mark Hall, Netteswell** and **Passmores** (the current Toddbrook).

The Conservatives won all these bar Little Parndon in 2021 but Labour did much better last year.

There are four pretty solid Conservative wards: **Church Langley North and New Hall** (Church Langley), **Great**

Parndon, Old Harlow and, presumably, the new ward of **Church Langley South and Potter Street**.

That leaves three to brawl over: **Bush Fair, Latton Bush and Stewards** (an amalgam of Harlow Common and Staple Tye) and **Sumners & Kingsmoor**, Labour won Bush Fair fairly easily last year (by 237 votes) but they have to fight quite hard to hold it. But let's assume they repeat last year's result here.

Labour also won Harlow Common (by 62) last year, while the Conservatives got Staple Tye (by 28). Let's also assume that the eastern end of Harlow Common, which is moving into the new Church Langley South, is slightly better for the Tories than the majority staying in Latton Bush and Stewards. That'd mean a very, very narrow Labour victory here - though possibly with a Tory holding one of the seats.

That produces a knife-edge Labour win - maybe only by one seat. But it also assumes Labour maintain their 2023 performance when they out-poll the Tories borough-wide by 2.3%. In 2022 they trailed by 9.6% and in 2021 by a massive 23.1% (hence the Tories sweeping all but one seat that year). If the votes more closely resemble 2022 or 2021 then the Conservatives will hold on. But their nine seat majority rests wholly on that 2021 landslide. This election too close to call.

Hart

Current council

11 Con, 11 LD, 10 CCH, 1 Ind

Seats up

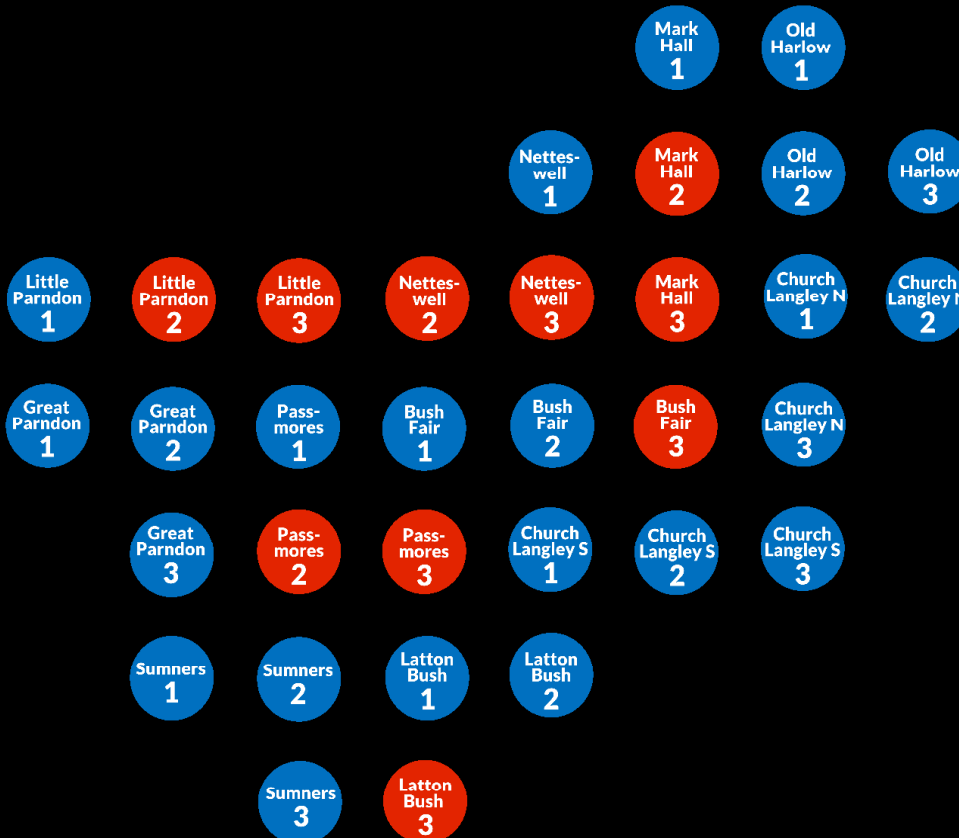
6 Con, 3LD, 2 CCH

Hart is what some might call a "well hung" council - and it's been that way for most of its life. This affluent part of north-east Hampshire - often voted the best place to live in England - has settled and quite secure enclaves for the Tories, the Lib Dems and the local residents' association: Community Campaign Hart (CCH).

It's also the home district of Monster Raving Loony Party leader Howlin' Laud Hope, so they usually have a presence in local elections here.

The Tories are likely to fare pretty badly here this year simply because they won six seats the last time this batch were up in 2021. In contrast, last year when they were far less popular the Tories held two. The Tories hold one last seat in each of the three Fleet wards: **Fleet Central, Fleet East and Fleet West**. CCH holds two of these wards, while the Lib Dems will be expecting to win Fleet East.

The other Tory vulnerability is in **Hook**. They should be ok here despite an independent winning last year - he was a re-elected



independent and the other two seats are Conservative-held.

Almost everything else in Hart is safe. The Conservatives aren't challenged seriously in either **Hartley Wintney** or **Odiham**.

The Lib Dems won the two **Yateley** wards and adjoining **Blackwater and Hawley** with over 60% last year. CCH holds the two Church Crookham wards a bit less securely, especially **Crookham West and Ewshott** (241 vote majority) where there was a 17% swing to the Tories last year.

If there's a further erosion the Conservatives can offset one of their likely losses in Fleet. But the council will stay under no overall control - which should mean a continuation of the Lib Dem-CCH coalition.

That's because, in 2021, there were all-out elections in Hartlepool following boundary changes. The Conservatives, even where they only fielded one candidate, topped the poll in seven of the twelve wards - and these are the seats up this year.

2022 and 2023 have been nowhere near as good years for the Conservatives

in Hartlepool. **Rural West** is the only guaranteed Conservative hold, though they should have a decent chance in **Hart**.

How well the Tories fare in pretty much every other ward they are defending will depend on the local profile of their incumbent councillor, and who else contests the ward.

In theory, Reform UK should be an existential threat to the Tories here: after all Richard Tice, the party leader, came second here as Brexit Party candidate in the 2019 general election. But Reform didn't poll all that impressively in last year's local elections. That said, they don't need to poll vastly to cost the Tories seats here: 10% taken principally from them will likely tip the seat to Labour.

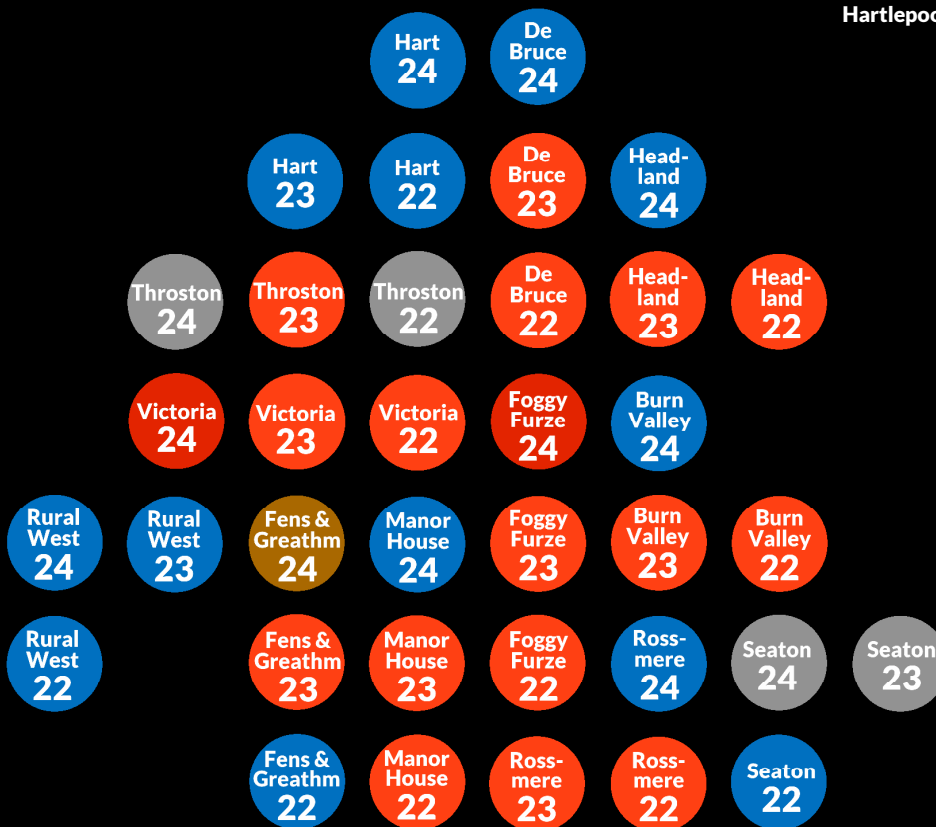
Hartlepool

Current council

17 Lab, 12 Con, 5 Ind, 1 Ind Un,
1 Hartlepool People
Seats up
7 Con, 2 Lab, 2 Ind, 1 HP

It will be a major upset if Labour fail to regain overall control of Hartlepool this year. They are only two seats short right now, and they fail to hold all but two of the seats up this year.

Hartlepool

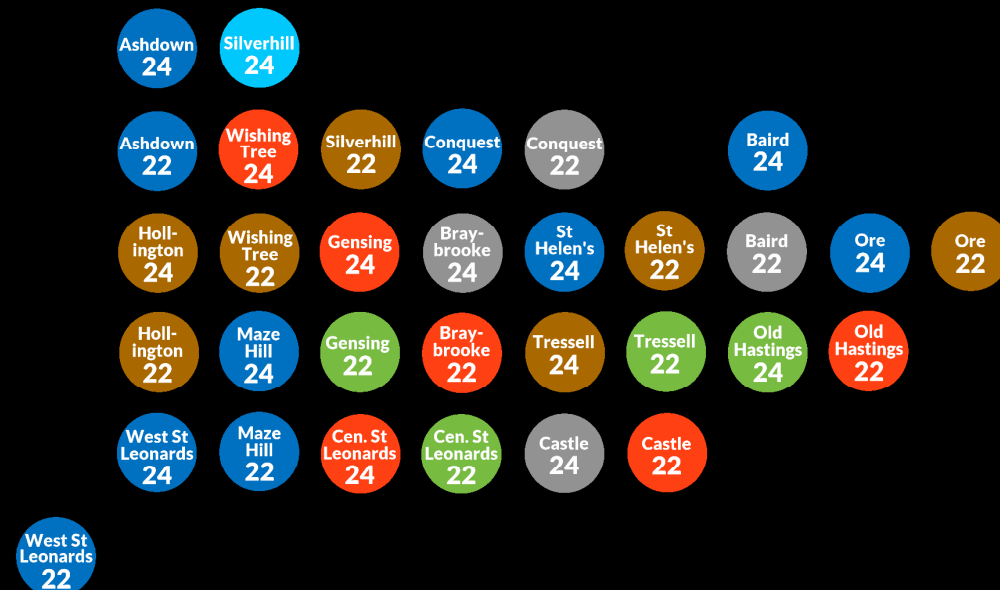


The most likely Labour gain is **Burn Valley**. They won here with 61% last year on a 25% swing from the Tories (though it was an independent seat up then). **De Bruce** was won by a similar margin, though that was a successful Labour defence rather than a gain. **Fens and Greatham** ward sees the sole defence by Hartlepool People. Labour gained a seat here last year by over 300 votes.

In **Foggy Furze**, Carole Thompson, who gained her seat in a by-election last year from an independent, is defending it for the first time. Her by-election win was closer than the Labour win in last May's election but she should easily hold on. Likewise **Manor House**.

The Conservatives have a decent shot at holding their seat in **Headland and Harbour**. Last year Hartlepool Independent Union (there have been a spray of minor parties winning council seats here over the past few turbulent years) lost out to Labour by fifteen votes. If that non-Labour vote floats around the Conservatives might be able to annexe it to their share and hold on.

Rossmere is odd in that the Tories didn't even field a candidate here last year, yet are defending the seat this year. Standing aside didn't prevent a Labour hold but there's a slim chance they might survive.



Labour should almost certainly be able to pick off at least two of these seats and regain their majority. The only fly in the ointment is that Conservative Teesside mayor Ben Houchen is up for re-election.

Last time he was on the ballot he won an astounding 71% of the vote - unprecedented for a Conservative in Teesside. He may not be quite as popular this time around but there is still the risk for Labour that he will turn out Tory votes that will help keep Hartlepool council seats Conservative. Even so, Labour should win.

Hastings

Current

10 Con, 7 HInd, 6 Lab, 4 Grn, 4 Ind, 1 Ref

Seats up

7 Con, 3 Lab, 2 HInd, 2 Ind, 1 Grn, 1 Ref

From one turbulent council (Hartlepool) to another.

When Hastings last elected in 2022 (it elects biennially) Labour held sixteen seats, the Conservatives twelve and Greens four.

All that changed in December 2023 when the entire Labour

cabinet, plus two backbenchers resigned from the party, forming Hastings Independents.

This breakaway group of eight subsequently reconfigured their control of Hastings in coalition with (and led by) the Greens.

The split is argued (from their perspective) to be about over-centralised control from party HQ, or (from HQ's) that this is a bitter set of Corbynite leftovers who have mismanaged the council to the point of bankruptcy and were going to be deselected as a result.

A ninth Labour councillor, Sabina Arthur, has been

expelled from the party but is not part of Hastings Independents - she's just an independent independent in this very confusing debacle.

To just make things more complicated, one Conservative councillor has defected to Reform UK - his seat in **Silverhill** is up this year; and another is a second independent independent who isn't on the ballot this year.

Of the three Hastings Independents whose seats come up for election this year, two are standing down while the third, Maya Evans, is the council's former deputy leader.

If the "groundswell of good wishes" H.I. claims it has been inundated by are real, they should have no trouble fielding candidates in every ward (presumably apart from the Green's) and that might have made things quite tricky for Labour were it not for the fact that only three of their seats are up.

Of the three Labour seats, **Wishing Tree** was quite close in 2021 (Labour won by 68) and much less so in 2022 (223). But the other Wishing Tree councillor is one of the Hastings Independent defectors.

Labour wasn't doing all that well in Hastings even before the split, losing its majority and a

growing number of seats to Greens and Tories alike.

The Conservatives have most exposure this year having won eight seats at the 2021 elections. Excluding the Reform UK defector in Silverhill, three of these seats are in wards split with HI. If HI do stand in these wards - and what do they have to lose? - either their position will be vindicated and they'll defeat the Tories, or they'll split the Labour vote and the Conservative incumbents will hang on (when they surely would have struggled in a straight Con-Lab fight).

The other four Conservative seats are in what are usually safe wards around the outskirts of Hastings and St Leonards. That may change if Reform UK fields candidates, but it's more likely their one councillor in Silverhill loses. Who to - who knows?!

There is only one Green councillor up for re-election, in **Old Hastings**, but she just happens to be new council leader Julie Hilton. She gained her seat on a 32% swing from Labour in 2021 and has a big majority so the likelihood is she survives.

The problem she has is that her coalition doesn't have a majority as it is. If Labour gains either of the two seats were HI councillors are stepping down,

or the third we're assuming Maya Evans defends, there simply won't be the votes in the

council chamber to keep them in power. But it won't be until 2026 when the bulk of the Hastings Independents will face the voters and either their so-called "new politics" will be endorsed or dismantled.

Havant

Current council

29 Con, 4 Lab, 2 LD, 1 Grn, 2 vac
Seats up
all (boundary changes)

In 2021 the Conservatives almost secured a monopoly on Havant council. There were 36 Tory councillors, 1 Labour and 1 Lib Dem. The party polled just shy of 60% borough-wide. Since then, things haven't gone so well.

In 2023, instead of touching 60%, the Conservatives didn't even manage 40%. They won five seats, but so did their opponents. This year, with every seat up following boundary changes they could lose a score if things are as bad as last year.

The council is being reduced by two seats this year: 36 instead of 38. It's a district of perhaps three parts: there is the town of Havant itself, there is Hayling Island, across Langstone

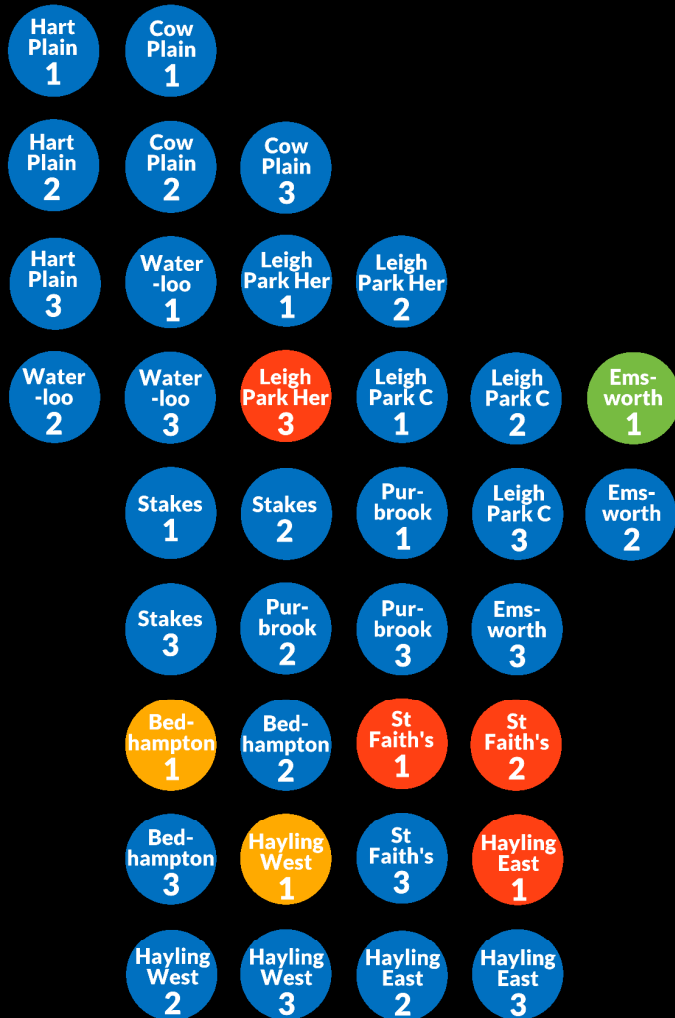
Harbour from Portsmouth. And there are some outlying townships like Emsworth.

Let's start with Havant itself. The town has politically quite different east and west ends divided by the A3M. The west is very strongly Tory: all five wards chose their councillors in 2023 despite the dismal result. All five wards: **Hart Plain**, **Cowplain**, **Purbrook**, **Stakes** and **Waterloo** are left essentially unaltered, so we can forecast a base of fifteen secure Tory seats (all wards become 3-councillor).

On the basis of 2023, things then become much trickier for the Conservatives - though there are years when they can sweep pretty much everything.

The east end of Havant - Leigh Park - has comprised four 2-councillor wards until now, but these have been redrawn as two 3-member wards: **Leigh Park Hermitage**, and the clumsily named **Leigh Park Central and West Leigh**.

Traditionally, these wards have been Labour or Lib Dem but the Conservatives have steadily encroached. Leigh Park Hermitage is basically a merger of Barncroft and Warren Park. Barncroft fell to the Tories in 2004 and has been loyal to them ever since (it wasn't up in 2023) while Warren Park has been far harder for the Tories to win: it



Havant

has one Conservative and one Labour councillor, though it voted UKIP in 2016.

In 2022, the last time these 2-councillor wards were fought, Labour held Warren Park by just four votes while the Tories won Bondfields by 204 (27%) so, had this new ward elected that year it'd have clearly elected three Conservative councillors. But probably not in 2023.

In an all-out election the Tories might be able to hook one of the seats given the ebbing appeal of Labour.

The two wards that basically merge into Central Leigh Park and West Leigh: Battins and Bondfields have a fairly similar electoral history to their neighbours. Although four Tory councillors represent this patch it is the somewhat weaker ward for them.

If we again look at the 2022 elections Battins is a multi-party mess: the Tories won but with only 34%. They gained the seat from the Lib Dems (22%) but it was the Greens who came second with 27%. In a ward that was resolutely Labour until 2002, that party managed just 9%. This is why forecasting Labour wins in this part of the borough is high-risk: they are part of Havant's history, not its present.

Bondfields was the more strongly Conservative ward in this brace: they won by 118 or 12 percentage points but, even so, they won with only 40%.

The two wards covering Hayling Island had an almost unblemished history of electing Conservative councillors until 2023 when **Hayling East** went Labour and **Hayling West** Lib Dem - and by large margins too. If 2024 is like 2023 it's hard to see any Tories being returned from Hayling given they lost by nearly 800 in both divisions.

That leaves three wards: **Bedhampton, Havant St Faiths** and **Emsworth**.

When Labour gained St Faith's in 2022 for the first time ever, it was a shock. But they repeated the shock in 2023 by exactly 700 votes, so unless voters have had a major change of mind in the space of twelve months Labour can be expected to take complete control of this ward.

Bedhampton voted Lib Dem in 2023 and has a distant history of voting for that party, but the Tories only lost by twenty votes so they have all to play for. In 2022 they beat the Lib Dems by over 400 votes, as a measure of just how bad their position deteriorated.

Emsworth elected its (and Havant's) first ever Green councillor in 2023 - again by an incontestable amount. This was another of those Green

"specials" where they surge either from nowhere or so far distant as to equate to nowhere, a 20% swing taking them from third to first. Again, it's very hard to see the Tories salvaging anything from this ward unless either of their remaining councillors has a massive personal vote.

So how does that all bundle up? Because they would have been very close wards, I'm allocating one seat to the Tories in the two Leigh Park wards and Bedhampton.

With the fifteen from the west end of Havant that's eighteen - exactly half the seats on the new council. There'd be ten Labour, five Lib Dems and three Greens. But the range spans a Tory majority of four to six to winning a few less than half the seats.

In the space of just three years the Tories will have fallen from holding all but two seats to the real threat of losing control of one of their safest areas.

Hyndburn

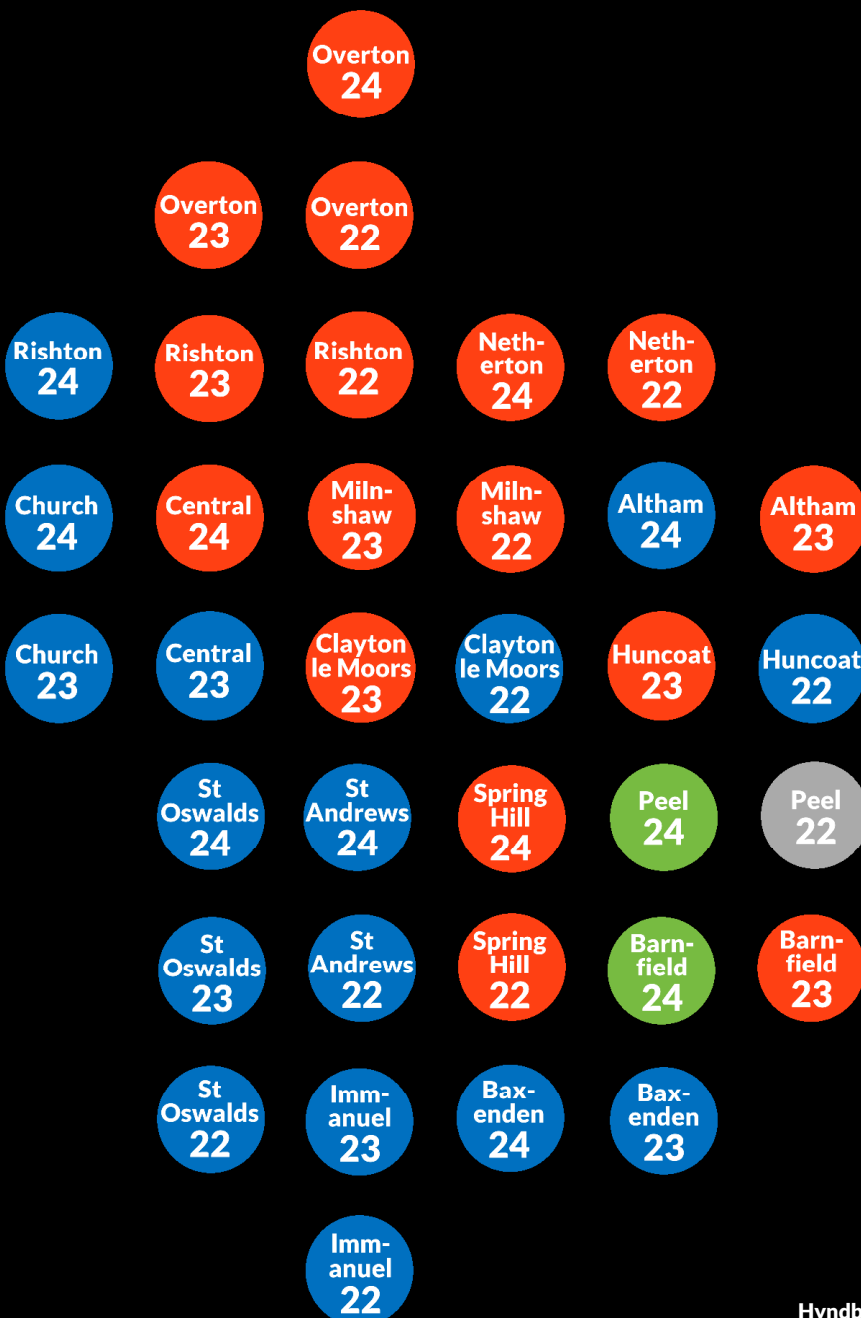
Current council

16 Con, 16 Lab, 2 Grn, 1 Ind

Seats up

6 Con, 4 Lab, 2 Grn

One of the more surprising "red wall" Tory gains at the 2019



Hyndburn

general election was Hyndburn (Accrington), which tends to only switch from Labour in their very worst defeats.

But the Tories followed up on that parliamentary success by removing a relatively hefty Labour majority (17 seats in 2019, 9 in 2021) in 2021, and making further progress in 2022. The Tories now run Hyndburn in the minority.

Add in the fact that two Labour councillors have defected to the Greens since these seats were last up (both councillors are up for re-election this year) and the fallout from the Gaza conflict and Hyndburn is going to be one of the councils to watch this year.

Although Hyndburn's Asian population is just 15% it is concentrated in two or three inner Accrington wards: **Central**, **Church**, **Peel**, **Spring Hill** and, to a lesser extent, **St Andrew's**.

The former Labour MP for Hyndburn, Graham Jones, was intending to contest the seat at this general election but was suspended in the wake of the Rochdale by-election anti-Semitism debacle for making what the party regarded as unacceptable remarks about Israel.

Things are further complicated because atypically, Accrington's heavily Muslim wards were

already not as monolithically Labour as is typical: Conservatives are competitive in some and results can be volatile, with massive swings between elections.

Most wards in Hyndburn have two councillors despite being a council electing annually, and twelve of them are up this year.

The two defectors to the Green Party represent **Barnfield** and **Peel** - and we have absolutely no idea how many people might vote Green because the party hasn't contested either ward before.

Barnfield looks the more promising for the party as it has a pluralistic history, having been held by Labour, Lib Dems and Conservatives. But this is a little fraught because the sitting councillor, Caroline Montague, gained her seat from the Tories and a Green split in the vote this year is at least as likely to hand the seat back as it is to produce a win for the Greens.

Peel, on the other hand, is one of those densely packed, heavily Muslim inner Hyndburn wards that voted two-thirds Labour in both 2021 and 2022.

Of the six seats the Conservatives are defending five were gains in 2021. The tightest was **Church** which they won by fifty votes in a two-horse race. The Tories had, prior to 2021, only won Church twice in the history

of Hyndburn council, though they then managed to win its second seat in 2022 by 34 votes. Sajid Mahmood is the Tory incumbent defending his seat this year.

Rishton and **St Andrew's** were also very tight Tory gains in 2021, though both have a much stronger vein of Conservative representation. They held St Andrew's more comfortably in 2022 but Labour gained the second seat in Rishton by 38 votes.

Conservative Susan Hayes gained **St Oswald's**, the eastern side of the town of Oswaldtwistle, by 84. Oswaldtwistle leans more Conservative than Accrington: all three of its wards (the third being **Immanuel**, not up this year) now have full slates of Tory councillors.

In **Altham**, a largely rural ward in the north east of the district, youthful Conservative councillor Dominik Allen gained his seat by ousting a Labour incumbent by the princely sum of 130 votes.

The father of Hyndburn's Conservative MP, Sara Britcliffe, gained **St Andrew's** (basically Oswaldtwistle East) ward from Labour in 2021. Of the party's gains, this was the most comfortable and St Andrew's more often than not backs the party.

Finally, **Baxenden**, an outlying affluent village south east of Accrington and the one seat the Tories successfully defended in 2021, should be safe enough.

What of the four Labour seats? **Central** is going to be very tricky for them. Aside from the Gaza factor in this Muslim ward, Labour's Abdul Khan only won here in 2021 by 23 votes. The Tories gained the other seat here last year by 84.

Labour has similar issues in **Spring Hill** (Accrington South). It's safer for them than Central but registered a much bigger swing - 22% - to the Tories in 2021. The 2022 result in this ward was very similar and the Gaza factor imperils Labour further.

In **Overton**, one of two wards covering the town of Great Harwood, Labour is defending a seat held in a 2022 by-election. This is yet another ward won by under a hundred votes and cannot be taken for granted, but Labour hold all three seats here and start as favourites.

Netherton - the other half of Great Harwood, is a fair bit safer for Labour: they won by 328 last time.

When there is so much churn in the political environment, locally and nationally, it is very difficult to forecast outcomes. It also often happens that when the election is over, churn

churns both ways and we end up with a slightly different alignment of the political map as we had before. Both Labour and the Conservatives have a real chance of taking majority control of Hyndburn - they both just need two seats. If Labour reclaims both seats from the Greens then it gets across the line. If the Tories can win either of those two marginal inner Accrington wards, hold the third and reclaim Barnfield, they'll be able to administer the area with a majority. Odds very slightly favour Labour, but it's a toss up.

Ipswich

Current council

32 Lab, 9 Con, 3 LD, 2 Ind, 1 vac

Seats up

9 Lab, 4 Con, 3 Ind, 1 LD

Anyone looking at the commanding position Labour holds on Ipswich council will wonder how the Conservatives won the parliamentary seat by nearly five and a half thousand in 2019.

Things should look even more lopsided after the 2024 local elections because the Tories are defending half their council seats this year (plus there are two independents who were elected as Conservatives up for re-election too).

The Conservative wards are scattered around the edges of Ipswich, and they should be able to rely on three wards: **Bixley** in the east, **Castle Hill** in the north and **Stoke Park** in the west (though they lost Stoke Park in 2022).

The reason Labour so easily wins Ipswich council but struggles with the parliamentary seat is that their vote is very evenly spread and deeper than the Conservatives everywhere - but not dramatically deeper.

In 2022, when Labour won all but three of the sixteen council seats, they were still only nine percentage points ahead of Labour. That's not nothing but, equally, it doesn't suggest the sort of vote that should net a party 81% of the seats.

This year Labour should very easily pick up the three seats held by Tory-independents in **Gainsborough** and **Sprites**. Gainsborough has never voted Tory before or since that 2021 gain and it took a 27% swing from Labour to achieve. In 2023 Labour won by twenty points.

Sprites - great name for a ward - is somewhat more marginal: Labour was ahead by less than ten points in 2023 but Labour should still get it back, especially if the incumbent fights the Tories for it, splitting their vote.

Whitton - the far north of the town - tends to go Conservative when Labour is in government but, apart from 2021, hasn't since. Labour was ahead by less than ten points last year so if the Conservative incumbent is standing again and has worked hard, that's close enough for him to potentially hang on.

The only ward left that is being defended by a Tory who is still a Tory, and which they didn't win last year, is the ward just south of the town centre: **Holywells**. This is historically a competitive ward - the Tories have won it more often than Labour, so it's a slightly different kettle of fish to the others. Labour won here by 128 votes and they're the favourites again but the Tories should still have a chance.

There are some other wards the Tories were very close to winning in 2021: **Bridge** (124), **Rushmere** (49) and **Whitehouse** (30), but 2021 is another country from where we are today, politically.

The Lib Dems are safely ensconced in their sole ward of **St Margaret's**. They have no other opportunities; nor do the Greens, despite Ipswich now adjoining the only Green-majority council in England: Mid Suffolk.

Kingston-upon-Hull

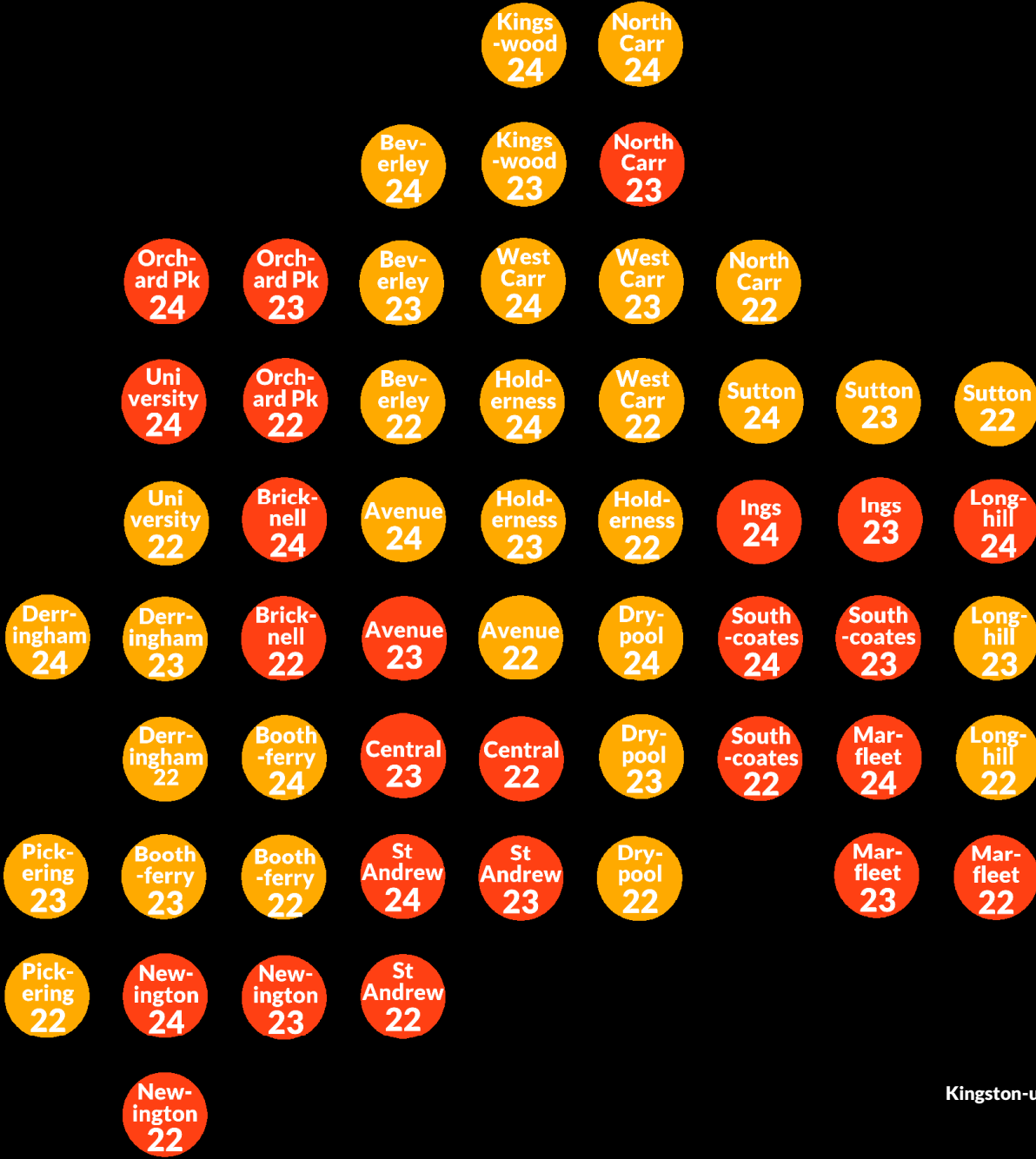
**Current council 33 LD, 24 Lab
Seats up 10 LD, 9 Lab**

An incredibly rare direct fight between Labour and Lib Dems in Hull.

2021 was the last time Labour won a majority on Hull council and things have deteriorated somewhat since then. In both 2021 and 2022 the Lib Dems won one seat more than Labour - and that despite Labour picking off the last two Conservative seats in **Bricknell**. But in 2023 the Lib Dems won three more seats than Labour and their margin in the popular vote expanded to nine points.

The Lib Dems have won Hull before, having a majority between 2007 and 2011. The difference between then and now, of course, is that then there was an unpopular Labour government; this time Labour lost control after twelve years of Conservative government.

Something clearly ails Labour in Hull, especially when you factor in how close the Conservatives came in the 2019 general election to winning Hull East; they weren't too far off in Hull West and Hessle either (notional results for the redrawn Hull West and



Kingston-upon-Hull

Haltemprice seat make it Conservative by nearly 3,626).

Labour has subsequently lost a council seat in **University** ward as one of their councillors became independent. His seat is up this year.

It's statistically possible for Labour to regain Hull this year but practically not. Not least because the gap between them and the Lib Dems widened last year from five points to eight. Has anything changed much in the ensuing twelve months?

Yes, but not in Labour's favour. In a February by-election the Lib Dems gained a seat from them in already-split Avenue ward on a 6% swing. The last Labour seat in Avenue is up for election in May and it will be an uphill slog to hold it.

The two wards the Lib Dems gained in 2021 were **North Carr** and **Sutton** (on 32% and 25% swings respectively).

Labour managed to defend a seat in North Carr in 2022 (keeping the swing there down to a mere 22%!) though they lost the third in 2023. All three seats in Sutton are now Lib Dem held and they won with 61% last year so neither looks like returning to Labour soon.

Labour is also going to struggle in **Longhill and Bilton Grange**, which they held in 2021 but

where they have since lost the other two seats.

They have a better chance of retaining **Ings** and **Orchard Park** but the Lib Dems are narrowing the gap year by year: they were just 98 and 76 votes off these two last year.

Unfortunately for Labour, none of the Lib Dem wards won in 2021 look insecure. The closest was **Avenue** and, though they only won it by six points, the Lib Dems are clearly now favourites.

Like Gateshead in respect of Blydon, it's a little anomalous that the Conservatives come quite close in two Hull parliamentary constituencies but have zero council seats.

It's entirely possible that non-Labour supporters maximise their voting power by choosing the party most likely to defeat them depending on the type of election, and that voters are generally far more inclined to vote Lib Dem in local elections because they see their councillors as hard working and responsive.

A good result for Labour would be holding the Lib Dem majority at seven seats. A bad result will see it expand into double digits.

Kirklees

Current council

35 Lab, 18 Con, 8 LD, 5 Ind, 3 Grn

Seats up

11 Lab, 8 Con, 3 Ind, 1 LD, 1 Grn

Kirklees is the largest council in England that is not a city. Covering the towns of Batley, Dewsbury and Huddersfield, and a sprawl of smaller villages across the Colne and Holme Valleys this is also a highly marginal council.

Even though Labour has twice as many seats as the Conservatives right now, their overall majority is just one, having lost four of their councillors to independent over Gaza and internal disagreements. One of these, in **Crosland Moor and Netherton**, is up for election this year,

This is another northern district where Gaza could be a problem for Labour, especially in Batley and Dewsbury, which have the largest Muslim populations. The new Dewsbury and Batley constituency has an Asian population of over 44%. Huddersfield is 23% Asian, and the vast majority of these populations are Muslim.

The political situation in Kirklees was already somewhat more volatile following the 2022 Batley and Spen by-election where the two Batley wards plus adjoining **Heck-**

mondwike voted strongly for George Galloway.

In the 2022 local elections, Galloway's Workers Party GB polled 33% in **Batley East** and 21% in **Heckmondwike**, though they disappeared in 2023.

Unforeseeable problems for Labour in these volatile Muslim wards aside, this should be another difficult year for the Conservatives.

When these seats were last fought in 2021, the Tories actually led the popular vote in Kirklees 38% to Labour's 36%. Yet that lead still only netted them eight seats to Labour's twelve, mainly because Labour distributes its vote more effectively. Last year, however, Labour was ahead of the Tories by nearly twelve points, winning thirteen seats to just five.

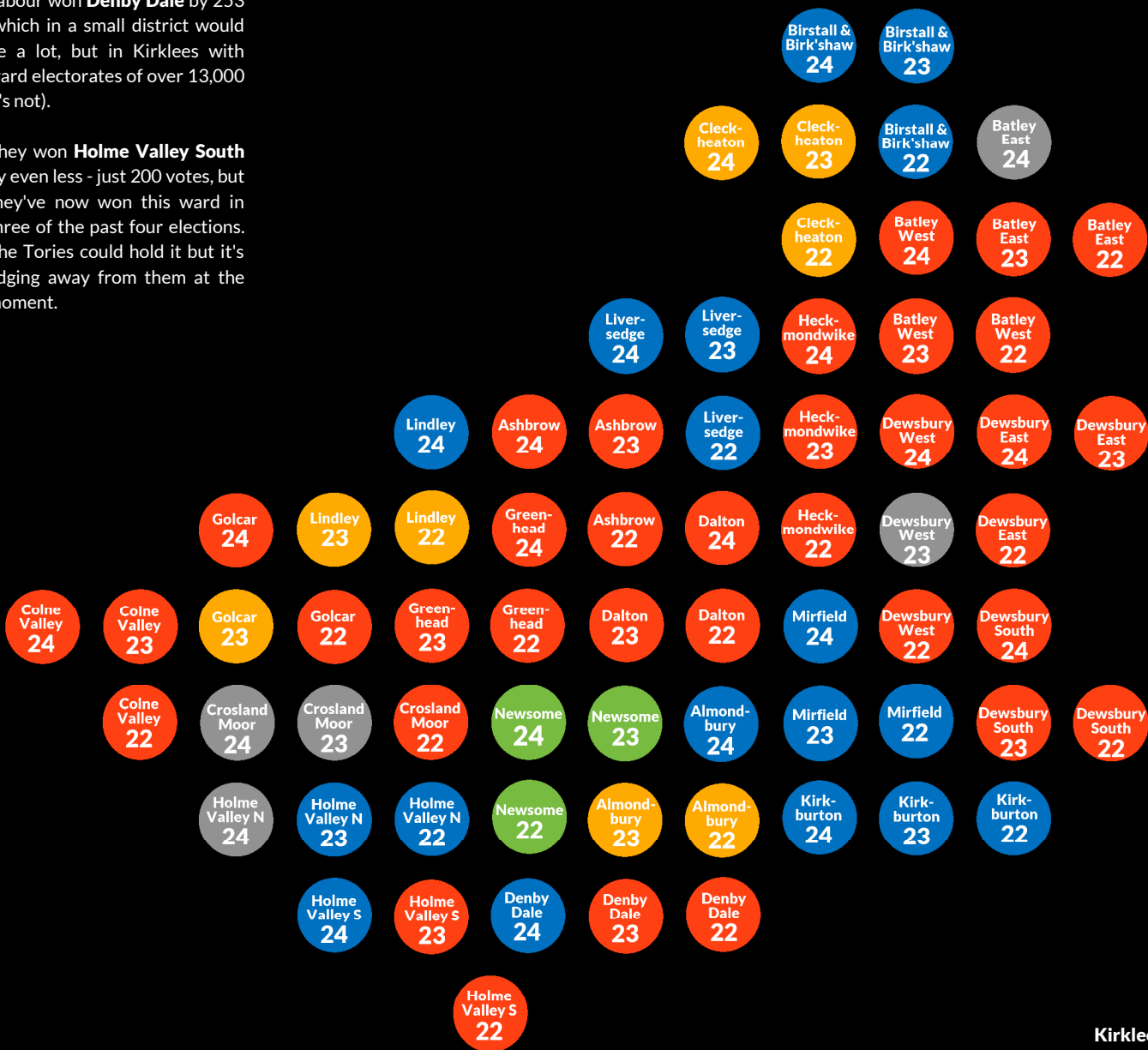
Where are the three that were Conservative in 2021 but not 2023 (actually it's four because the Tories won a seat in **Holme Valley North** that was independent in 2021).

The four are **Denby Dale** and **Holme Valley South** to Labour; and **Lindley** and **Almondbury** to the Lib Dems.

While Almondbury and Lindley look quite tough ones to hold given how much the Lib Dems won them by in 2023, the wards they're contesting against Labour are marginals,

Labour won **Denby Dale** by 253 (which in a small district would be a lot, but in Kirklees with ward electorates of over 13,000 it's not).

They won **Holme Valley South** by even less - just 200 votes, but they've now won this ward in three of the past four elections. The Tories could hold it but it's edging away from them at the moment.



Kirklees

But the Tories may (or may not) be able to win **Batley East** because of the kerfuffle over Gaza. After Galloway's mob evaporated, the Tories missed out last year by just fourteen votes on a swing of more than 26%. There was a 19% swing in

But the Tories may (or may not) be able to win **Batley East** because of the kerfuffle over Gaza. After Galloway's mob evaporated, the Tories missed out last year by just fourteen votes on a swing of more than 26%.

There was a 19% swing in **Dewsbury West** as well, though the Tories were quite a long way adrift there. Both of these wards have councillors who have just left Labour and, while they're not up for election, they will no doubt be agitating against their old party.

Then there is **Holme Valley North**, where a bona fide independent elected in 2021 is up for re-election. This was a solidly independent-held ward for some years up until 2022 but the Tories now hold the other two seats.

Much may depend on whether the incumbent, Cllr Charles Greaves seeks re-election or stands down. Last year the Tories won here with just 33% of the vote, Labour snapping at their heels with 29% and a new independent candidate winning 25%.

The Greens are embedded in their south west Huddersfield ward of **Newsome** (64% last year), but also boosted their vote in next door **Crosland Moor and Netherton** - a ward where two Labour councillors just quit, including one, Imran Sardar, who is up for re-election this May. If the Greens will have him, standing for them might be a way for him to retain his seat, though the party was still almost 1,200 behind Labour in 2023.

The Lib Dems have pockets of support dotted around Kirklees though the days when they had a lock on most of the wards in the Colne Valley constituency are long gone. They will attempt to win a second seat in **Golcar** (western Huddersfield) off Labour which will be tough: they won here last year by 162 despite having an incumbent standing again.

They should win Almondbury and Lindley from the Conservatives, and **Cleckheaton** at the top of the borough is safe.

It is this bloc of Lib Dems, Greens and whatever number of independents may win alongside them that is the main reason why Kirklees is often hung. With Labour's majority now down to a single seat, there's a fair chance this could reoccur this year, albeit that with such a big lead in councillors it's unimaginable

they would not still run the administration here.

Knowsley

Current

31 Lab, 7 Grn, 3 LD, 3 Ind, 1 vac
Seats up
12 Labour, 1 Grn, 1 LD, 1 Ind

There was a period between 2012 and 2016 where every council seat in Knowsley was Labour-held.

Since then Labour's position isn't quite so overwhelming. Boundary changes in 2016 led to every seat being up for election and, firstly Lib Dems gained the massive **Prescot North** ward (that includes Knowsley Great Park, hence it's size). Independents popped up at either end of the borough: in Kirby's **Whitefield** ward, and in **Halewood South**.

But it has been the Green Party that has really begun to take a sledgehammer to Labour, across the middle of the borough. First they won **Prescot South** which includes some of Whiston. They also won **Whiston and Cronton**. But last year they broke into two wards in Huyton: **Roby** and **St Gabriel's**.

This is not to say Labour is on the cusp of losing Knowsley: they still polled 60% borough-wide and won nine of the wards up last year. This remains an

exceptionally deprived borough and the fact it's in Merseyside - parts of it merge seamlessly from Liverpool into slightly more suburban streets - give it the imprimatur of a rock solid socialist district.

No, all it means is that, for the first time in decades there is an opposition to Labour of sufficient size to hold them to account in council meetings; and to give voters some belief that, should they want to seize it, there is a credible chance to elect a councillor not wearing a red rosette.

If the wards split the way they did in 2023, Labour's majority will shrink further - by six if the Greens hold the one they won four years ago and add the other three they won last year; by eight if independents can hold Whitefield and gain a seat in Halewood South.

There is some evidence, though, that the independents are flagging: there were big swings back to Labour in both wards last year. In fact, a by-election is pending in Whitefield because one of the two independent councillors there failed to attend a meeting for six months and was disqualified.

It is oppressively difficult to fight against the grind of an over-whelming majority in a borough where party competition barely exists, let alone thrives. The Conservatives

managed to field just four candidates last year and the least unsuccessful of them managed 117 votes, 5.2%. The last time Tory councillors were elected here was in 1992.

Leeds

Current

**61 Lab, 18 Con, 6 LD, 9 Ind,
3 Grn, 2 SDP**

Seats up

18 Lab, 9 Con, 3 Ind, 2 LD, 1 Grn

The largest council up for election this year is Leeds.

Ninety nine seats, of which a third are up for election. Labour easily controls the council when they are in opposition nationally and, even when they lose their majority, such as between 2004 and 2011, remain by far the largest party.

But like most West and South Yorkshire city councils, the boundaries extend far beyond. That is why the Conservatives, Lib Dems and independents still have a hefty number of councillors in opposition, even as they have been pushed out of Leeds-proper wards.

Since Labour regained the council, the Conservatives have normally been able to rely on seven wards ringing the city: **Guiseley and Rawdon, Adel and Wharfedale, Alwoodley, Harewood, Calverley and**

Farsley, and (more recently) **Pudsey**. Occasionally they can add seats from Horsforth and Ardsley and Robin Hood.

But in the last two stages of this current electoral cycle their national unpopularity has created problems. Labour now holds two seats in Guiseley and last year the Greens staged a 30% swing to snatch **Wetherby**: the first time ever that outlying town had ever not elected a Conservative councillor. It wasn't even close: 4,079 to 2,958.

The Greens will be doubly pleased with that gain of Wetherby as they lost their grip on their long-term ward of **Farnley and Wortley**, right across the other side of Leeds. They first won there in 1999 but lost their last seat in 2023.

But despite their loss here, the Greens are gradually assuming the mantle of Labour's challengers in inner city Leeds.

They won a seat in **Hunslet and Riverside** in 2022, though missed out on a second there last year. But they almost gained **Armley** which adjoins both this ward and Farnley, falling short by 185, and in the massive **Headingley and Hyde Park** (electorate of 23,785 in 2023) by 285. There was a 23% swing to the Greens in East Leeds' Gipton and Harehills, though they were still over a thousand short there.

Labour's tormentors in inner Leeds aren't confined to the Greens: the Social Democratic Party now holds two of the seats in **Middleton Park** and will be hoping to take full possession of the ward this year.

The Lib Dems who, at the depths of unpopularity of the last Labour government held as many as twenty six seats here (remember they also won Leeds North West constituency in the aftermath of the Iraq War), have been pushed back to just two outlying wards: **Otley and Yeadon** in the north, and **Rothwell** in the south. They are out of the picture now in wards they used to win regularly like **Moortown, Burmantofts, and Headingley** and **Horsforth**. They may still be in with a shot at **Weetwood**, though they lost their last seat there in 2023 and, with no councillors making the case for the party that ward may now go the same way as their others.

There are also nine independent councillors in Leeds: six from the two wards covering the outlying town of Morley that doesn't much like being bundled in with Leeds, and three from another outlying, but separate ward: the semi-rural **Garforth and Swillington**, defined by its River Aire floodplains.

The independents have had a grip on **Morley North** and **Morley South** since the all-out

elections of 2004, though Labour sporadically won South. Garforth has been independent since the 2018 all-out elections.

All three wards were previously Labour, though given the size of Andrea Jenkins' Tory majority in the Morley and Outwood constituency, and that of Alec Shelbrooke in Elmet and Rothwell, these must have voted heavily against Labour in 2019.

Leeds doesn't have a vast Muslim population; nothing like the size of Bradford's, but it is geographically concentrated in one or two wards like Headingley and Hyde Park with its tightly-packed streets, which also house a lot of students. It'll be worth watching whether any independents campaigning on Gaza or the Green Party can mobilise enough anti-Labour votes here, or elsewhere in the centre of the city.

Lincoln

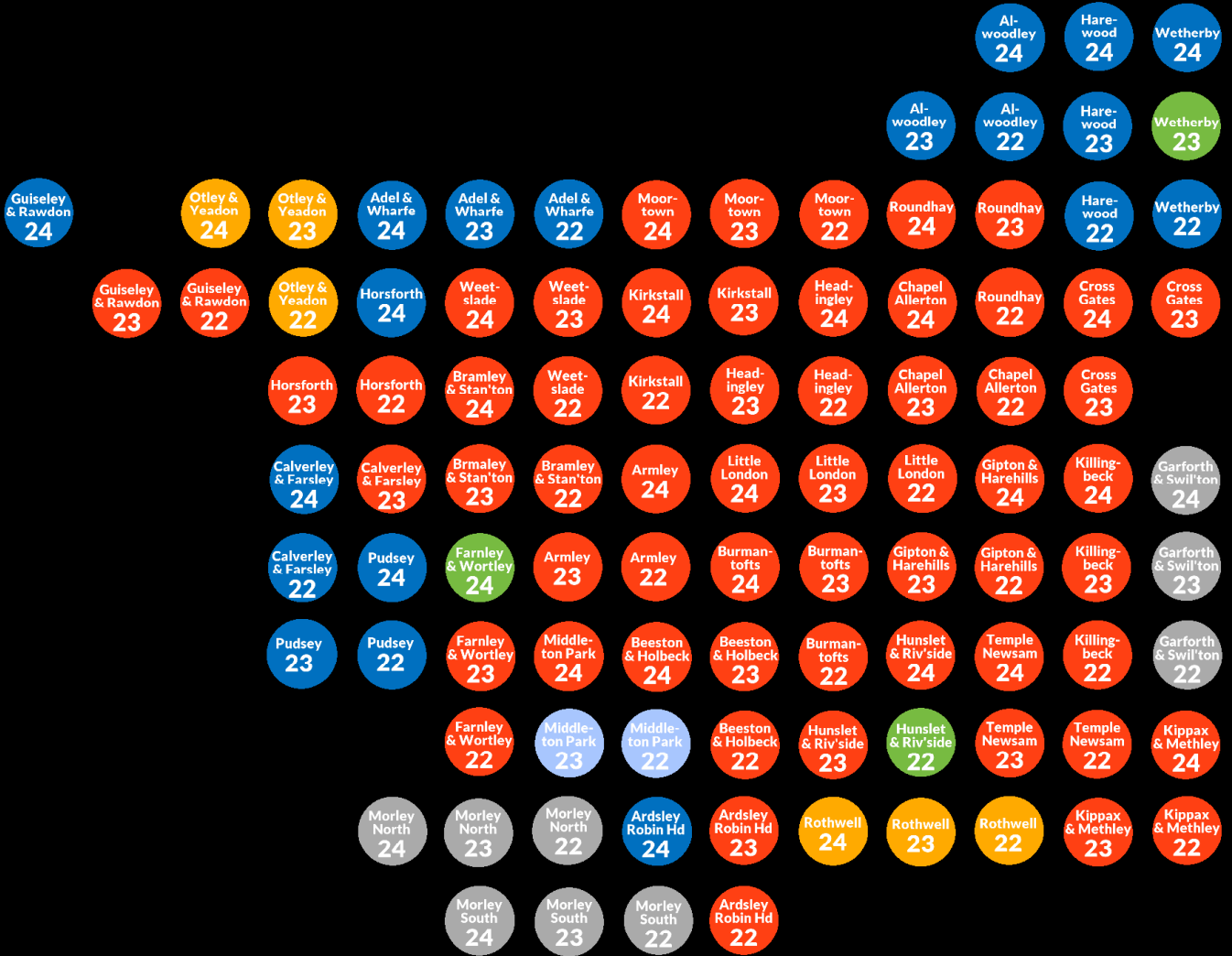
Current council

20 Lab, 9 Con, 4 LD

Seats up

5 Lab, 5 Con, 1 LD

Last time these eleven Lincoln seats were up for election, the Tories outpolled Labour, 41.7% to 40.7%. The last time that happened was 2008. Last year Labour thrashed the Conservat-



Leeds

ives 49.5 to 25.9%, with the Lib Dems not all that far behind on 16.7%.

Losing by twenty three percentage points is not going to win you many council seats - and the Tories held just one last year.

Lincoln is a slightly unusual district in that it is clearly in two parts: Lincoln proper, and then some suburban wards that are basically an overflow of North Hykeham Forum, most of which is in North Kesteven. These two areas are connected by Boutham and New Boutham.

There are no wards in this small district that Labour can't win; perhaps I should say no Tory-held wards Labour can't win, but we'll get to that in a moment.

Hartsholme may be the most vulnerable 2021 Conservative seat up. If you just look at how the Tories did four years ago, Hartsholme doesn't look at all marginal: they won by 28.2 points or by more votes than the Labour candidate polled. Yet look at Hartsholme last year: Labour won by 33.5 points (though a popular Labour incumbent was up for re-election then).

Birchwood was closer last year: Labour won by just eighty votes. And **Moorland** - these are all wards that run along the south end of the city - Labour won by thirty-three. Even **Witham** - the

one ward the Tories held in 2023 - wasn't all that safe.

But while Labour is likely to take seats from the Conservatives, they are under intense pressure from the Liberal Democrats. Until 2023 the largest number of councillors the party had won in Lincoln was just two. They doubled that group size last year.

The Lib Dems took the third seat in **Abbey** ward last year which Labour would have been resigned to. But at the same time they gained the adjoining ward of **Glebe** on a 33% swing.

They won by over thirty points so Labour's going to have to push back strongly to have any chance of defending another seat there. There aren't any other Lib Dem targets but, if they can pull off a 30% swing then any ward could be put into play.

Labour's council majority is likely to rise by one - two at most - because they'll win more from the Tories than they'll lose to the Lib Dems. But this will represent the peak of their control of Lincoln.

Maidstone

Current council

25 Con, 12 LD, 11 Ind,

4 Lab, 3 Grn

Seats up

All - boundary changes

Maidstone is one of those places where the Lib Dems have had a very strong local government presence but have never put together a strong challenge to the parliamentary seat.

Part of the reason for that is that Maidstone is a polarised district that includes not just Kent's county town but a lot of surrounding countryside. Maidstone is, indeed, largely Lib Dem but everything surrounding it is not.

This year sees the whole council up for re-election following boundary changes. A mix of 1-2- and 3- councillor wards has been retained because from this year on, Maidstone will elect quadrennially.

Six councillors' seats are being abolished for a new total of 49. Initial analysis suggests that four of these are Conservative seats, one Lib Dem and one Green. It's hard to see any party other than the Tories winning an overall majority here and this loss of five of their seats makes it near certain that Maidstone will remain hung - and well hung at that.

Unless there is a big shift, Labour, Lib Dem and Green councillors don't equal the Tory total, let alone stack up to enough to control the council.

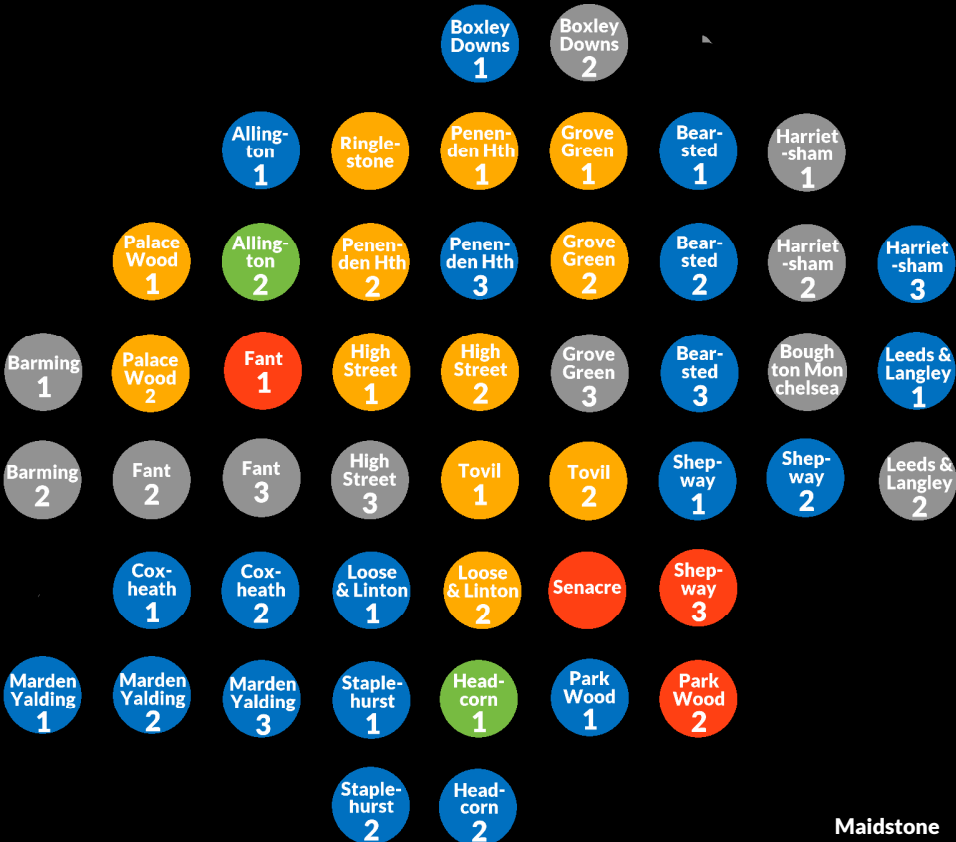
That said, the boundary changes are quite radical, there are a lot of split wards already and there have been some defections so these factors combined could produce a lot of churn.

There are just three wards likely to have elected a full slate of Conservatives: **Bearstead and Downswood, Coxheath and Farleigh**, and **Marden and Yalding** for eight seats.

Conservatives would also have won seats (mostly in their good year of 2021) in **Allington and Bridge, Boxley Downs, Harriet-sham, Lenham and North Downs, Headcorn and Sutton Valence, Leeds and Langley, Loose and Linton, Park Wood and Mangravet, Penenden Heath and Shepway**. That gets them to twenty seats.

The Lib Dems have a cluster of twelve seats covering most of Maidstone town. The party wins in Maidstone town, but not overwhelmingly. Last year, for example, they won **Allington** with just 39% and **High Street** with 37%. Only **East** and **North** were won with more than half the vote.

Two of their councillors have switched to independent and



Maidstone

Shepway. Here independents are the main challenger, though in nearby districts like Ashford and Folkestone the Greens have made big inroads in rural wards.

Given their precarious national situation the Conservatives will do well to get close to twenty seats on the new council and, in likelihood will fall a few short of even that number. Twenty five are needed for a majority. Labour's top end is seven: three each in **Fant and Oakwood** and **Shepway** and one in **Senacre**.

The Greens may win anything between none and five: they'll be targeting **Allington** where they already have a councillor, and another single-councillor ward; **Ringlestone**, which adjoins it on the other bank of the River Medway. This new ward only has somewhat more than 2,000 electors so the winner may well be the candidate who makes themselves best known.

They also have a councillor in the outlying south western ward of Sutton Valence but this village is being merged with Headcorn. The Greens only just edged Sutton Valence last year and Headcorn has been very safely Conservative, so there'll be a battle royal to win the merged ward.

The goal of the Lib Dems, Labour and Greens is surely to get enough councillors to string a tenable coalition together.

one to the Tories, so the intrinsic group should be fifteen, not twelve.

Labour has also suffered two defections, both in Fant ward: the west end of Maidstone. The party has no other targets in the town itself - in the same way that Conservative votes have been annexed by the Lib Dems in several urban areas where Labour is dominant, here Labour

voters are persuadable that voting tactically to keep the Tories out is sound.

Labour has more potential in the adjoining town of Shepway, where it currently has one councillor apiece in Shepway North and Shepway South. But Shepway is very working class and Brexit (both wards have elected UKIP councillors) and as a result Labour has struggled.

These two wards are rejigged with Shepway becoming a 3-member ward, and a new single-member ward, Senacre, being created. So still four councillors for Shepway, but a different way round.

The Conservatives dominate in the rest of the district - and this isn't just woods and fields: twenty of Maidstone's councillors will represent the area beyond Maidstone town and

This will still be tough unless they can also win over some of the independents who, until now have been content to let the Conservatives administer Maidstone in the minority.

A continuation of that status quo may be the most likely outcome given that the Tories may well still be so much the largest party as for any other arrangement to be difficult to construct. But Rishi Sunak may contrive such a bad Conservative result as to make it a possibility.

Manchester

Current council

87 Lab, 4 LD, 4 Grn, 1 Ind

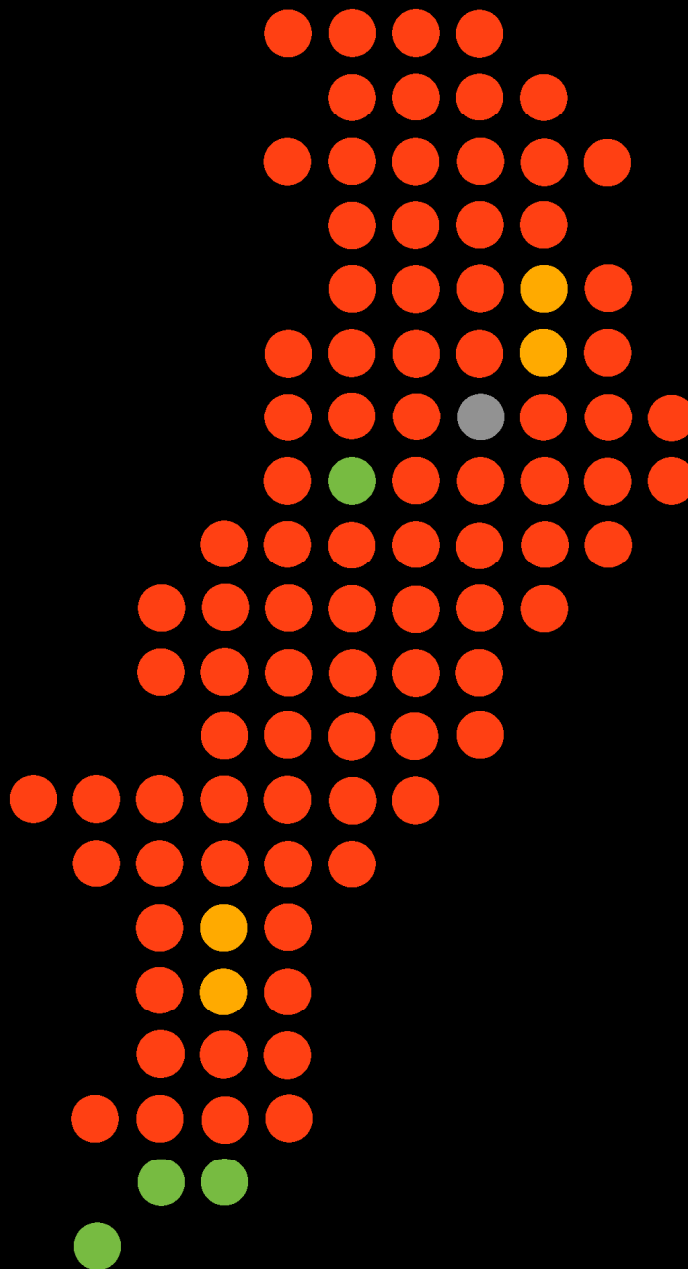
Seats up

30 Lab, 2 Grn

Manchester is, electorally, one of the dullest cities in England which, to anyone other than Labour, is a bit disappointing - as somewhere of its size, diversity and importance to the north of England deserves more of a battle.

The fact Labour's grip on Manchester is so tight is hardly the party's fault: they just field the candidates and the electors vote for them.

But they do so in massive numbers: 65% voted Labour in last year's local election down the length of this linear city.



Labour polled less than 50% of the vote in just five of the thirty-two wards (and three of those five were the wards they didn't win). In two Labour won more than 80% and in a further twelve more than 70%. In the face of such a massive support base it is hard for any party to build a winning position.

Both the Liberal Democrats and Greens are trying, however. The Lib Dems secured two seats, one of them by their former Manchester Withington MP John Leech, in **Didsbury West** - part of what might be called Manchester's suburban belt.

But they haven't been able to lock that ward down, let alone put together the bloc of wards they held during Labour's spell in government when they had an opposition group of up to thirty-eight. Affluent wards like **Chorlton** and **Chorlton Park**, **Withington** and **Didsbury East** are, for now, securely held by Labour.

When the Lib Dems were strong in the early 2000s, they didn't just do well in that southern belt of middle class wards: they also made inroads into Manchester's minority ethnic areas towards the centre of the city and in Gorton. Manchester doesn't have a massive degree of ethnic diversity: in the new Denton and Gorton and Manchester Rusholme seats just over a quarter of the electorate is Asian, for example - and those

Manchester

are by far the highest proportions. But, as with most Muslim communities, they are concentrated in big numbers in specific wards. Wards like **Gorton and Abbey Hay, Ardwick, Longsight and Clayton and Openshaw**.

How will these wards respond to Labour's travails over Gaza? One of their **Ardwick** councillors, Amna Abdulatif left the party following the start of the conflict but that still leaves two dozen Muslim Labour councillors loyal to the party.

In 2022 the Lib Dems gained a by-election seat in **Ancoats and Beswick**, after pulling close in that May's elections. They gained a second seat there last year and will be favourites to take the third in May. They'll also be trying to turn **Didsbury West** all Lib Dem and have a decent level of support in **Didsbury East** but are still around a thousand short of Labour there.

The Greens won their first seat on Manchester City Council in 2021, in the somewhat atypical (for the sort of ward Greens win, if there is such a thing) of **Woodhouse Park**: both the last ward alphabetically and the last running north to south. It covers the area around Manchester airport in the Wythenshawe district, one of the largest council estates in Europe. They haven't quite locked Woodhouse Park down yet: they were

only 146 ahead last year, but now hold all three seats there.

They also have a seat in **Hulme** - possibly the most troubled ward in Manchester, after Labour councillor Ekuia Bayunu defected. Her seat is up this year but she faces a massive challenge holding on. Labour won Hulme 71% to 19% last year and, whilst it isn't the lowest turnout ward in the city, around 80% simply don't vote in local elections.

The Greens are also building support in the two new city centre wards (new in both senses: they were newly created in the 2018 boundary review and are largely new areas of skyscrapers and student housing), **Deansgate** and **Piccadilly**.

These are difficult wards to build support in because they are still growing and much of the new residents and ensconced behind controlled entry systems and concierges. Of the two, the Greens were only 126 behind in **Piccadilly** last year and would love to create a base in the north of the city.

The Conservatives ceded their last seats in Manchester in 1996 and have no targets whatsoever. In 1973 they had forty Manchester councillors and were just one percentage point behind Labour. Last year their highest share was 17.1% in

Baguley but that was up against a Labour vote of 68.4%.

The Conservative vote migrated rapidly from Manchester in the 1980s, first to suburban boroughs like Trafford and Stockport, and yet further out to places like Wilmslow and Alderley Edge.

Labour's vote in Manchester jumped by twenty points, give or take, the moment the party lost power nationally in 2010 and it will need to drop by at least the same amount to make the city council competitive again.

Milton Keynes

Current council
26 Lab, 16 LD, 14 Con, 1 vac
Seats up
11 Con, 5 Lab, 3 LD

No party has held a majority on Milton Keynes council since 2006 when the Lib Dems lost control after four years. These eighteen years of no overall control will almost certainly end in May, and Labour will be the party ending it.

One of the recurring themes I've written about in these council profiles is the additional damage Conservatives will face this year because of how well they did in 2021, the last time this batch of seats was fought. Milton Keynes is an exceptional example, The

Tories are defending eleven seats to just five Labour and three Lib Dems.

Last year, just two Conservatives were elected. So, unless the electoral situation has transformed in the past twelve months, as many as nine Tory seats are in jeopardy. Labour only needs to win three of them to get claim a majority - and they're likely to win a few more than that.

The narrowest of the Tory wins over Labour in 2021 were in **Stony Stratford** and **Stantonbury** where they were 45 and 175 ahead respectively. Last year Labour were 380 and 639 ahead there.

The Conservatives won two of the three Bletchley wards: **Bletchley Park** by 522, and **Bletchley West** by 270, missing out on **Bletchley East** by just 183. Those two were still competitive in 2023 but Labour won both.

And these are the most extreme examples of how far, how fast the Tories have fallen. In 2021 they won the vast, outlying **Olney** ward, which is almost as large as the rest of Milton Keynes combined, by 1,670. Last year Labour gained **Olney** for the first time ever, by 136 votes.

They won the most southeasterly Milton Keynes ward: **Danesborough and Walton** by

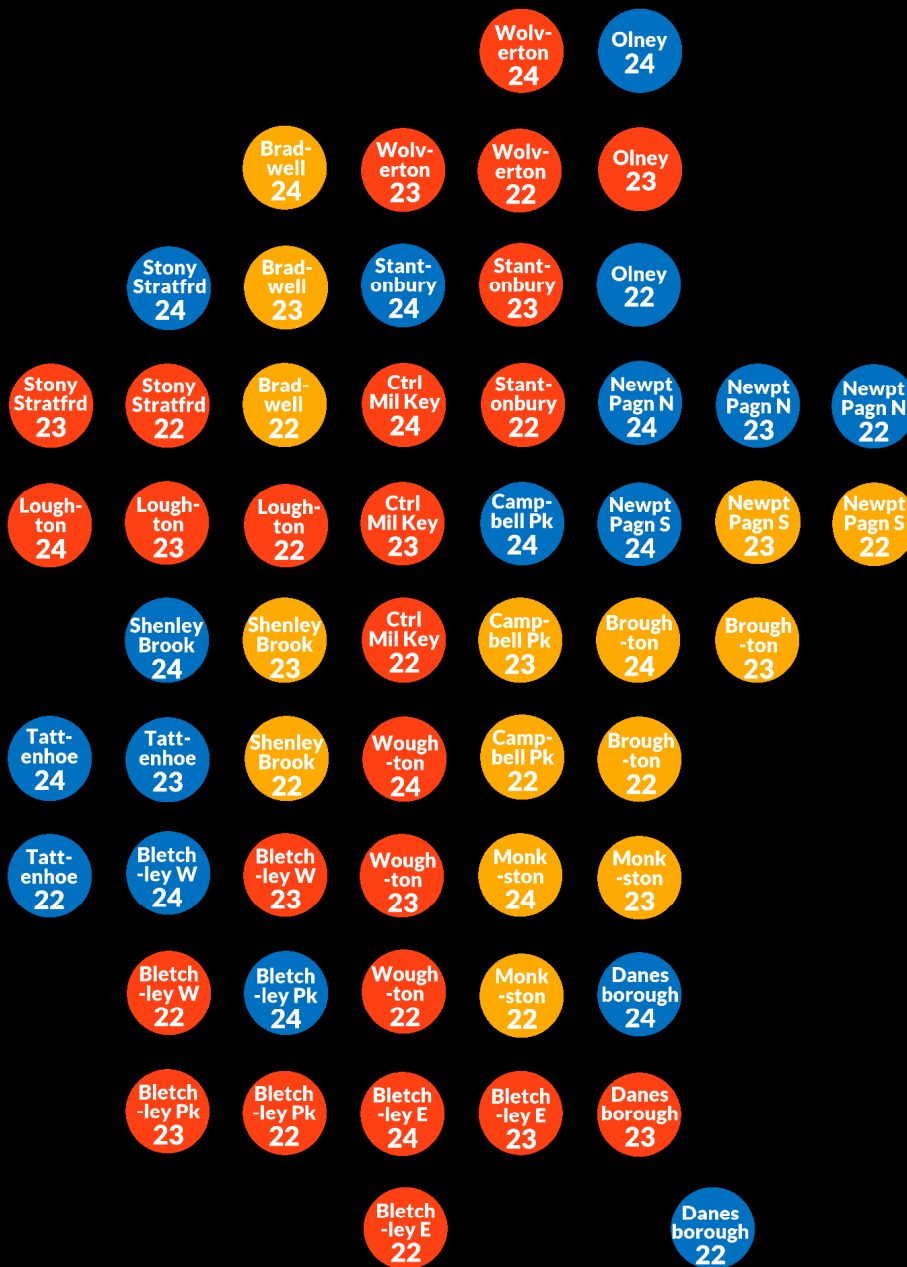
1,410; but lost it by 165 last year. If the Tories can't win these two, there's not much point to them.

Nor are the Lib Dems out of the picture. There are four wards this party will expect to pick up from the Tories, most obviously **Newport Pagnell South**. 2021 was the first time since 1980 a Conservative had beaten a Liberal candidate in this ward. 148 votes separate them.

Immediately south of Newport Pagnell is **Broughton** which the Tories won by just 110. And to the east of Broughton is the long, linear **Campbell Park and Old Woughton**, won by 317. Finally, there is **Shenley Brook End** which was the Tories easiest of their gains over the Lib Dems, by 370.

One of the challenges the parties face in this district is how fast the town is growing. The town didn't get its own MP until 1983 (it used to be part of Buckingham). Then it was split into two prior to the 1992 general election and, at the coming election there will be two and just over a half Milton Keynes seats.

This growth means there are lots of new voters constantly coming onto the electoral register, very possibly changing the underlying political balance of wards.



It also necessitates quite frequent boundary changes to ensure decent levels of electoral equality (that each councillor represents roughly the same number of electors as each other). Despite only being reviewed in 2014, the largest ward here is already over 4,000 voters larger than the smallest.

If this year's results go the way of last year's then this council will look something like 32 Labour, 17 Lib Dem and just 8 Conservative - an overall Labour majority of seven. Labour has only won a majority here four times. Seven seats is somewhat comfortable in a council that elects by thirds: the whole point of which is to provide some stability of leadership and protect against the much bigger changes all-out elections can deliver.

The Conservatives had 26 councillors here in 2021 and for them, a result as bad as last year's will mean a massive amount of work to get back to competitiveness.

Mole Valley

Current council
30 LD, 6 Ind, 3 Con
Seats up
10 LD, 2 Ind, 1 Con

Central Surrey focussed on Leatherhead, Dorking and

Ashted, is represented by councillors serving Mole Valley.

Last year in all-out elections the Lib Dems routed the Conservatives: there are just three Tory councillors left here representing two split wards: **Leatherhead South** and ward with a ridiculously long ward name that is essentially Box Hill. The Lib Dems polled 44% district-wide, the Conservatives 27%.

The council has long been competitive - as far back as 1994 the Lib Dems briefly won control and, before that, the area had a major independent group of councillors.

But this is part of that seam of Surrey commuter belt that has been antagonised to madness by the brand of Conservatism epitomised by Brexit, Boris Johnson and the spreadsheet mundanity of Rishi Sunak.

Mole Valley voted to remain in the EU 53% to 47% and, as the Tories pivoted to win the support of Leave-voting areas in the north, so they have lost droves of votes to the Lib Dems in places like this.

There are local factors harming the Tories in Surrey too: financial mismanagement in neighbouring Woking and planning errors in nearby Tandridge have destroyed the party in those districts - both are up for election this year too

so I'll save more explanation of their travails for those profiles.

Now Mole Valley, Guildford, Surrey Heath, Woking and, probably this year Elmbridge, are Lib Dem-run: unprecedented Conservative defeat in what was widely regarded as just about their best county in England (Bucks might have something to say about that). Independents hold two wards in Ashted securely - these are part, for now, of the Epsom and Ewell constituency but will soon vote in this constituency, being renamed Dorking and Horley.

The Conservatives have a few targets. They'll want the first of the two Lib Dem seats in **Brockham, Betchworth, Buckland, Box Hill and Headley** (yes, that's just one ward!) yet, even though this ward split last year, the Lib Dem was more than 400 votes clear of the Tories.

Despite missing out on all three seats in Capel, Leigh, Newdigate and Charlwood, the top Tory loser was only twenty two votes behind the lowest Lib Dem winner. And they have an outside shot in **Holmwoods and Beare Green** where they were less than ten points adrift.

The Greens were just over 300 votes short in **Dorking North** and considerably further back, but (just) second in **Dorking South**. These are their best

shots at winning seats here for the first time.

Labour is non-existent here: they failed to even stand in four wards last year, whether because they couldn't find enough activists to stand or to help the Lib Dems monopolise the anti-Conservative vote. Labour has won the occasional seat in Mole Valley - in Leatherhead for example, but not since 2003, and that won't change any time soon.

It is impossible for the Lib Dems to lose Mole Valley - they may even maintain or strengthen their huge majority by gaining the one Tory seat in Leatherhead South.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Current council
47 Lab, 23 LD, 7 Ind
Seats up
17 Lab, 6 LD, 3 Ind

Newcastle is another city that looks absolutely solid for Labour while the party is in opposition nationally - and so will be fine for them this year - but deteriorates. But it's nothing like as solid for Labour as, Manchester, for example.

The main reason is the band of affluent wards running along the north of the city: the Gosforths and the semi rural

wards like **Parklands** and **Castle**. Most of the city's intelligentsia; it's university class if you will, that hasn't moved into the villages of Northumbria lives here. They are separated from the city centre and the much less affluent neighbourhoods along the Tyne and into Byker by Town Moor, the massive open space, and the A167.

All but two of the wards held by the Lib Dems lie north of the moor. The two exceptions are **Ouseburn** and **West Fenham**.

A different dividing line has emerged more recently: the A1. To the east, a collection of organised independents and, more tenuously, Newcastle First residents have taken the fight to Labour. The independents hold three wards here: **Chapel**, **Denton** and **Westerhope**, and Lemington. The large **Callerton and Throckley**, running down most of the city's western boundary, was won by First in 2019 but they didn't defend the seat last year.

There is just one ward the Conservatives have any real chance in, and that is **Gosforth**. The Tories' main problem is that this is a Lib Dem-held ward: these two parties fish in the same pond for their votes and the Lib Dems have been much more effective at hooking their voters.

Given that this vote sees itself as progressive and liberal, and was the bulk of the city's narrow Remain vote in the EU referendum the bait the Tories are fishing with isn't especially alluring. Nonetheless, the fact their vote hasn't evaporated in Gosforth, a ward they have never won since 1973, is somewhat impressive.

The Greens have done quite well in **Byker** ward: they were just 210 votes short there in 2023 and they might be helped by there being no other wards at the moment they have a chance in: all their resources can be focussed here. Heaton may come into play down the road but Labour have a sizeable lead here for now.

The Lib Dem challenge is to expand their band of wards south of the moor. The problem they have is that none look very promising. **South Heaton** is their best shot but others they held during their period in power are securely Labour; or they have been superseded by others.

Labour's majority is being whittled away, but mostly because of the seats the party is losing to independents in the west, not Liberal Democrats in the centre and east.

Labour's share is hardly impressive: they won 42% last year. But they benefit from two factors: a fairly even spread of

that 42%, which is usually enough to win a ward; and they face a divided opposition, splitting the non-Labour vote.

But 42% is right on the edge of being too small a share to hold the number of seats they currently win. Any decline, especially an even one, will soon show itself in lost seats.

North East Lincolnshire

Current council
27 Con, 9 Lab, 3 LD, 3 Ind
Seats up
11 Con, 1 LD

The north and north-east coast of Lincolnshire has shown itself to be among the least willing to return to its Labour roots since the rupture between that party and working class Leave voters.

Last year, the Conservatives retained control of North Lincolnshire: the council covering Scunthorpe and the area either side of the Humber Bridge. While this is a very polarised local authority, not a single seat changed hands.

Meanwhile, look at the dashboard above. In this neighbouring council that encompasses Grimsby, Cleethorpes and Immingham, Labour is defending zero seats because

they won zero seats the last time they were fought in 2021.

That was extraordinary failure - and it won't be repeated this year. But it's touch and go whether they'll be able to erase the Conservative majority of twelve seats. It's somewhat more likely that the Tories will lose their majority, but it's down to one seat either way.

Last year, Labour did indeed win six seats among the third up for election. But this year only five of those wards won last year are up. That won't do.

When these seats were last up in 2021, the Conservatives absolutely thumped Labour: they polled 56% borough-wide to Labour's 28%. There's been a considerable swing back since: last year the Tories led 42 to 39. Yet, of the three seats the Tories lost last year, two were to independents. Just one, **Croft Baker**, was to Labour.

All three Tory losses were fairly large: **Croft Baker** by 187; **Freshney** by 570 and **Yarborough** by 354. In fact the Tories came third in both.

Labour should also be able to win **Heneage**, **Sidney Sussex** and **South**: all three were easy holds last year.

So there are the six potential Conservative losses. If all six fall, the council will have 21 Tories, 13 Labour, 5 Indepen-

dents and 3 Lib Dems. Parity means the Tories retain control on the Chair's casting vote. To make it possible for them to be outvoted, Labour will need to win Immingham. On any economic measure, Immingham should be Labour: it's a gritty industrial port town which has elected the party's councillors far more often than any other.



North Hertfordshire

Labour had a majority here for a short while prior to the Blair landslide in 1997 but there is little chance of the party repeating that sensation this year because the Lib Dems are much stronger today than they were in 1990s. It is not the Tories that will block Labour from winning here: it's the Lib Dems.

Although this sounds like a rural council, North Hertfordshire is dominated by the twin towns of Hitchin and Letchworth. It also stretches to the remote town of Royston on the boundary with Cambridgeshire and Knebworth just west of Stevenage, so there is a bit of countryside here too.

If we allocate the seats won over the last electoral cycle to the new seats (most of which are largely unchanged) we get 18 Labour, 18 Conservatives and 15 Lib Dems. This assumes the two extra seats created in the new **Graveley, St Ippolytes and Wymondley** ward go Tory. But they could go Lib Dem.

The Conservatives have been rapidly losing ground in this Remain voting district. They held 36 seats out of 49 here in 2015, Today they are down to fifteen and, with all-out elections, they could fall as low as ten - though it's hard to see them doing much worse than that.

By this measure the Conservatives look to be slight gainers in the boundary game. But those figures include a lot of Tory seats won in their good 2021 round. If we apply a different measure: who won what the last time the seats were up in either

But since the ward switched to the Conservatives in 2018 it's remained loyal. Labour were 239 short last year which, because it's a small ward, requires a 7% swing to win. That's not impossible but if they're able to achieve it, why didn't they in 2023?

North Hertfordshire

Current council
19 Lab, 15 Con, 15 LD
Seats up
All - boundary changes

2022 or 2023, and give the new ward to the Lib Dems, then we get Labour 22, Lib Dems 21 and Conservatives just 8.

There's a fairly wide battleground. The wards that are currently split are (with Labour) **Baldock West** (Baldock Town) and **Letchworth South East** - possibly **Letchworth Grange** too, which has been split into two wards.

The Lib Dems have seats in **Hitchin Priory**, **Knebworth**, **Letchworth South** and **Royston Meridian**. The Lib Dem-held Chesfield ward has been split and the more likely inheritor of the Lib Dem tradition here is **Great Ashby**.

This is why I'm notionally making the new ward created from Chesfield notionally Conservative. But it may not be; it's just rural wards like Graveley are more likely to be Tory than suburban wards.

The Conservatives will almost certainly emerge from these local elections having fallen from largest group on the council to smallest.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been in coalition in North Hertfordshire since the Conservatives lost their majority in 2019. But it's the Liberal Democrats who are in the ascendency in this county; they have a massive majority in St Albans and Watford, a

comfortable one in Three Rivers and Dacorum, and should strengthen their minority administration in Welwyn-Hatfield on 2nd May.

They may well have their eye on the new Hitchin constituency at the general election - and that's relevant to their campaigning effort in North Herts. It's unlikely, but possible, for the Lib Dems to become the largest party, in which case the lead party in the coalition will flip.

North Tyneside

Directly elected mayor
Norma Redfearn (Lab)

Current council
47 Lab, 6 Con, 6 Ind, 2 vac
Seats up
All - boundary changes

North Tyneside fuses together two socially and politically very different areas. There are more than two communities here: there are former mining areas, there are the docks on the Tyne, and then there are the seaside neighbourhoods of Tynemouth and Whitley Bay.

Politically though, the pit villages and the dockside communities are staunchly Labour, while the coast is still Conservative.

But fourteen years of Tory government have cracked the wall of Conservative seats and so the Labour majority in North Tyneside is now very large.

It hasn't always been so. North Tyneside was one of the first authorities to vote for a directly elected mayor and in 2002 and 2003 - and then again in 2009 - the winner was a Tory, Linda Arkley (from 2003). Labour has now won the post three times and by more than twenty points and almost certainly retain the post this year.

There's now enough history of elected mayors to start looking at whether the role affects the choice of voters when it comes to their councillors, given it alters their purpose compared to councils with cabinets and committees.

It might have had an impact in North Tyneside because, as I mentioned above, the Conservative monopoly on the authority's coastal wards has cracked but not broken completely. Labour has failed to lock most of these seats down, as they have in other metro authorities with wards that started off Tory and weakened.

In North Tyneside the parties are engaged in a game of whack-a-mole with the Tories capable of winning five or six wards, but not at the same time. Let's see what happens this year as every

seat is up following fairly radical boundary changes.

There is one safe Conservative ward: **St Mary's**: the only ward left that has a full slate of Tory councillors.

The Tories can also win what is now **Cullercoats and Whitley Bay South**, **Preston with Preston Grange** and **Tyne-mouth**.

But there are other wards that may well return to the Tory column if or when they return to opposition nationally: **Whitley Bay North**, **Monkseaton** and, perhaps, **North Shields** - a recreated ward that for the past couple of decades has been part of Riverside ward.

But the inland Tyneside wards are a different kettle of fish. There is no history of voting Conservative here: only **Denton** once did, right back when the authority was founded in the early 1970s, and **Weetslade** towards the end of the last Labour government.

A chunk of this inland territory is being combined with roughly half of Blyth Valley; one of the so-called "Red Wall" constituencies gained by the Tories at the 2019 general election.

Because Blyth Valley was won by just 712 while North Tyneside went Labour by 9,561 the new constituency - Cramlington and Killingworth - is

notionally regarded as fairly comfortably Labour.

But the Cramlington half of Blyth Valley is where the vast majority of the Tory vote comes from (Blyth itself is still fairly strongly Labour), so there is a fair chance the new seat is going to be almost as marginal as the old one.

In last year's elections Labour came just twenty votes short in Tynemouth ward, 295 in St Mary's, and won Cullercoats by 207. And then there is the anomaly: **Collingwood** ward.

in 2021, Labour won Collingwood with 90.4% to the Lib Dems' 9.6% - the Conservatives didn't even stand. Then in 2022, the Tories' Olly Scargill won here - and it wasn't even especially close: 331 votes.

The Tories repeated the gain last year too, and by much more: 698. This while Labour was gaining seats in next-door Cullercoats, which has nearly always voted Conservative.

As such, there's a high chance of the Tories gaining the third seat in Collingwood ward even as they could lose any of their longer-term three others.

There were two vacancies by the time of the elections. One is in safely Labour Valley (now most of **Backworth and Holystone**) but the other is the last Conservative seat in

Cullercoats which was held by former mayor Linda Arkley. She died in October 2023.

Given her high profile Arkley would have had a fair chance of holding the seat but, given the past two years' results, Labour must now be strong favourite to win here.

Whatever happens with this set of seats the Labour majority on North Tyneside, and the elected mayorality, is secure.

Norwich

Current council

19 Lab, 13 Grn, 4 Ind, 3 LD

Seats up

6 Lab, 4 Grn, 2 Ind, 1 LD

After last May's council elections Labour had a majority of seven seats on Norwich. So how is it that it's now under no overall control for the first time since 2012?

The answer is those four independents: all formerly Labour, who left the group in November. Three of the four represent Town Close ward, the fourth adjoining Lakenham. Two of them face re-election this May - and in their statement resigning from Labour they expressed their intent to stand again.

If they had simply served out their remaining time but not sought re-election Labour would be near-certainties to regain a majority in Norwich. If they do, in fact, stand things get somewhat complicated.

Town Close was for years a Green ward (Norwich is one of the best Green districts in England) and, while Labour has built themselves into a strong majority, if its now independent incumbents split the vote the Greens might - might - win the ward back. **Lakenham** has a more solid Labour tradition but there have been some quite hefty swings here over the past cycle.

Labour's problem is slightly wider than this quartet of independents. The Greens pose a bigger problem.

The Green Party first won seats in Norwich in 2002 and grew to fifteen seats by 2012, backed by thirty percent of the vote. Then they collapsed, falling to just five seats in 2018 and a nineteen percent share. But they've gradually built back up, last year winning their highest share ever: exactly 33%. They are still two seats short of their largest group, but they picked up a seat in **Wensum** and will aim for a second this year.

To really progress they need to win back Town Close and they were not too far back in **Mile Cross** last year - 356. They need

just over a 9% swing on last year's result to win there.

There are no Conservative councillors here - haven't been since 2012, but they've never been especially strong on this council.

But this doesn't help Labour at all - because voters can't be corralled by the party to protest against the Tories. Rather, progressive voters who'd like a more radical alternative are free to vote Green: it's Greens (and Lib Dems) who can call for a protest vote against Labour here, without any fear of letting the Conservatives win.

The Lib Dems aren't really a factor in Norwich: Eaton seems secure for them, but they weren't close anywhere else. There are wards they held when they were the principal beneficiaries of anti-Labour protest voting in the early 2000s, like **University** and Lakenham, but most wards that elected Lib Dems then elect Greens now.

In their very good year, 2021 (I say very good but they still couldn't win a single seat) the Tories came close in **Crome** ward - the boundary ward adjacent to Sprowston and Thorpe St Andrew.

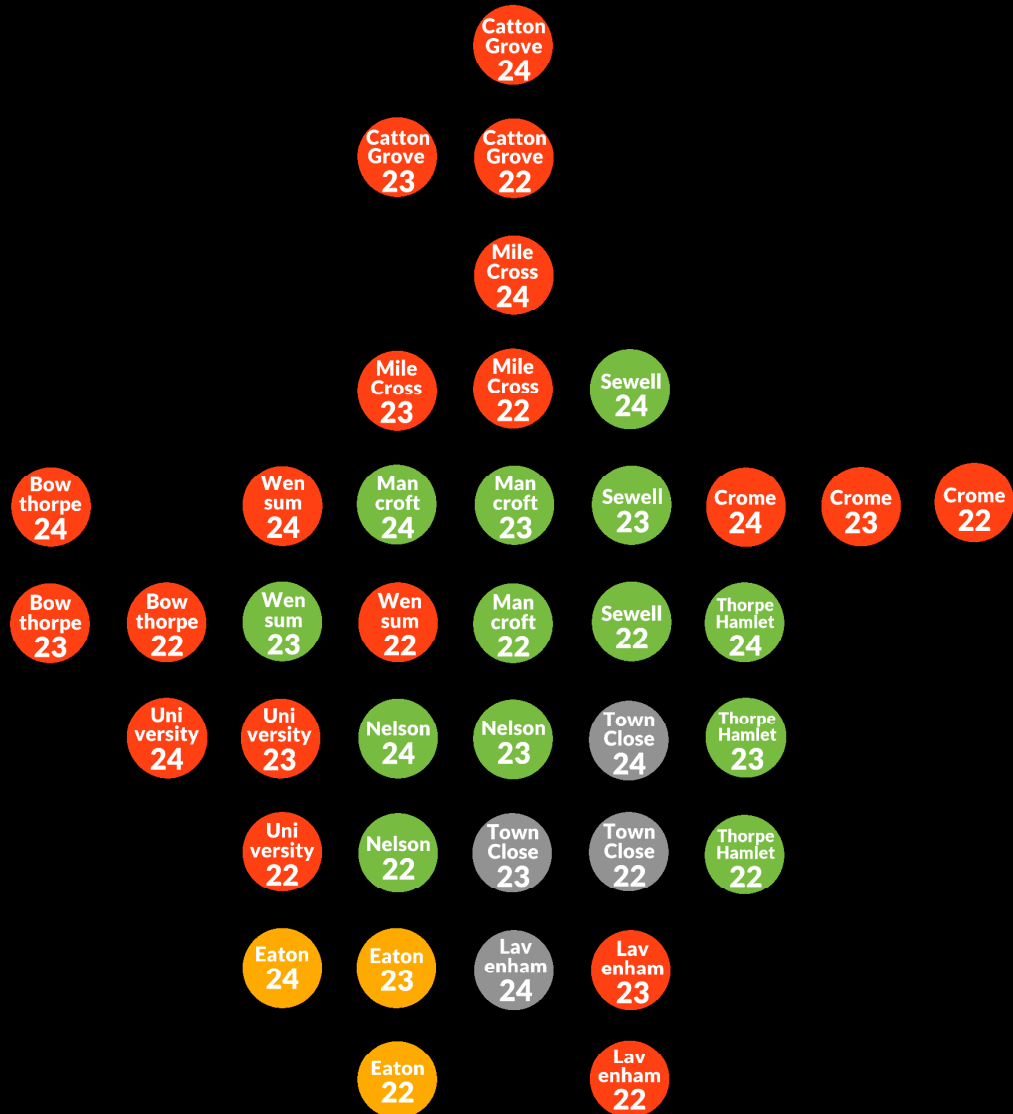
Once these were outlying distinct villages but the growth of Norwich has turned them into a continuous urban or suburban area. This is where

the Conservative votes exist en masse and why so much of the constituency called Norwich North consists principally beyond the city's boundaries.

Anyhow, by 2023 the Tory vote had fallen back to 747 adrift (compared to 152 off in 2021).

If the Greens gain a second seat in Wensum and hold their four seats up for election, Labour can only regain a majority - by one seat - by winning back both independent seats. They should be favourites - but not prohibitively so - to do this, but this is another of those odd results for Labour.

Fourteen years into a Conservative government, their main opponent should be storming ahead to overwhelming leads in somewhere like Norwich. In 1995, for example, Labour polled 57%. Last year - a good year for them by any measure - they polled 43%. If they slip much further, helped by the independents perhaps, then regaining their council majority becomes much harder.



Nuneaton and Bedworth

Current council

27 Con, 5 Lab, 2 Grn

Seats up

All (boundary changes)

There is a chain of councils running down the central Midlands that effectively measures how heavily Leave areas are feeling about the Conservatives. North to south, Cannock Chase, Tamworth, Nuneaton and Bedworth, and Redditch swung massively to the Conservatives in the wake of the EU referendum. Their swing away from Labour was about far more than Brexit but that was the booster.

Up until 2021, Nuneaton and Bedworth - which elects by halves normally, but is all-up this year because of boundary changes - had only once given the Conservatives a majority: it was a reliably Labour council.

But in 2021 the Conservatives polled 58% to Labour's 26%, and in 2022 50.5% to 34.7%. In a district like this where most wards are fairly marginal, such landslide vote share margins produce landslide seat margins: fifteen Tories to one Labour and one Green in 2021; twelve Tories to five Labour and one Green in 2022.

These Midlands leave councils swung back to Labour by a lot last year - but we don't have any data on what might have happened in Nuneaton and Bedworth because it wasn't up.

We can reasonably assume that Labour would have done a lot better - maybe winning parity with the Tories. This year the huge Conservative majority of twenty seats (out of thirty four) is effectively erased because of the boundary review.

Because most of these wards are highly competitive in normal years it's impossible to forecast the outcome of the new wards in a year in which Labour should do well.

But let's speculate anyway!

Even in good Labour years, the Conservatives can always rely on **St Nicholas** and **Whitestone**, and a new ward has been carved out of St Nicholas - **Eastboro**.

Every other ward in Nuneaton and Bedworth has traditionally been Labour-held. But lets add the ones that have swung especially far from them recently to the Conservative column.

Those are **Arbury**, **Attleborough**, **Bede**, **Bulkington**, **Galley Common** and **Slough**. That comes to eighteen seats. Nineteen are needed by the Tories to hold power by the

chair's casting vote and twenty for a majority.

The Green ward is **Weddington**, but they haven't made the ward safe. A new ward has also been drawn here: **Milby**. That will either make Weddington safe and the new ward Conservative (likely) or both wards Green but remaining marginal (less likely).

Labour has four what you might call safe wards - that is: wards they won in 2022 (but not 2021): **Camp Hill**, **Chilvers Common** (Wem Brook), **St Mary's** (Abbey), and **Stockingford West** (Kingswood). Those plus the other currently Tory-held wards that they won by less substantial margins in 2022 get them to sixteen seats.

Milby could be the key ward, therefore. If the Tories get it, they keep their majority. If it goes Green there will be a hung council. But confidence in this forecast is low because wards comfortably Tory in 2021 or 2022 could easily flip to Labour or split.

Oldham

Current council

33 Lab, 10 LD, 9 Ind, 8 Con

Seats up

12 Lab, 4 LD, 2 Con, 2 Ind

Labour has been slowly getting into trouble in Oldham again, after years rebuilding from a

period of Lib Dem administration. The party won back its majority in 2012 and, by 2018 it was a very comfortable 32 seats. But then it declined rapidly to just four in the all-out elections that occurred last year. It's climbed to six because an independent in **St Mary's** defected to Labour.

The cause of Labour's travails is not resurgent Lib Dems: they are polling in a range 13-17%; far below the 35% they managed a few years earlier. Nor is it the Conservatives: their vote range has been stable for decades. It's because of a surge in support for other parties, principally local organised independents. In 2012 all "other" parties, including independents, polled just 6%. In 2014 they polled 29% and, barring one election, have maintained that sort of vote share every year since.

Thirty six independents and four "Northern Heart" candidates stood in the all-out elections last year: ten won.

Oldham is one of the most polarised towns anywhere. It has wards that have a big majority of those from South West Asian backgrounds: **Coldhurst** is 60% Bangladeshi for example; **Werneth** is 66% Pakistani and Bangladeshi; **St Mary's** 58%.

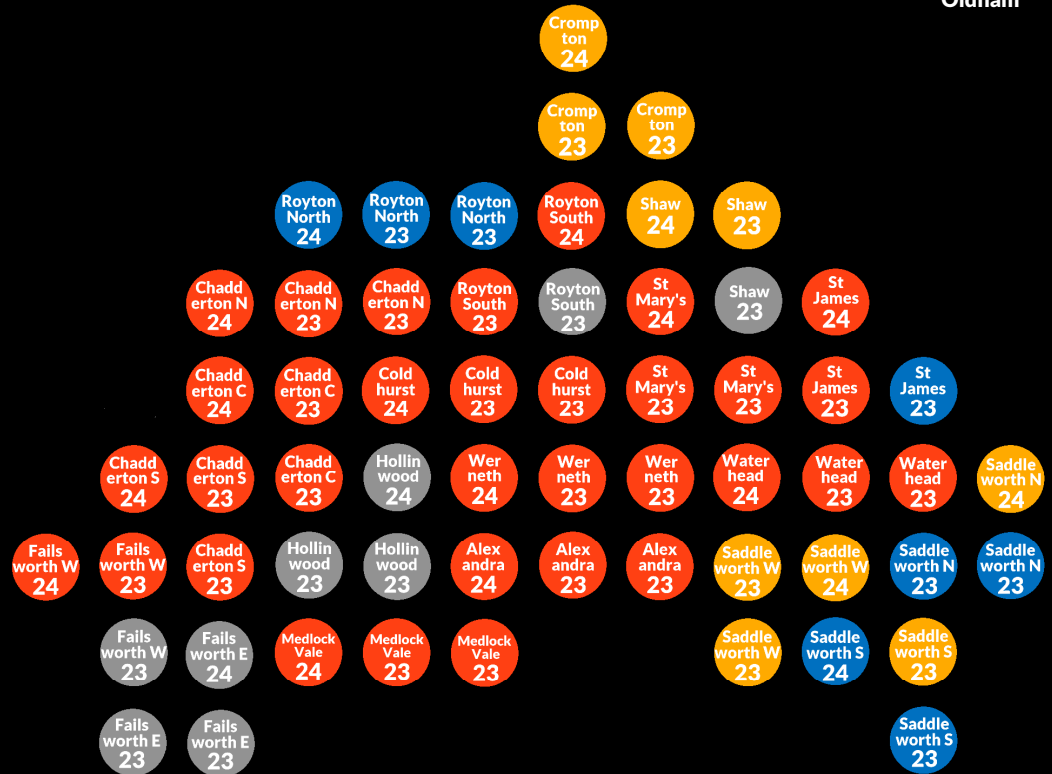
There have been defections over Gaza but, almost uniquely,

they've come from the Conservatives. All three councillors from **Hollinwood** ward defected.

2023 was the first time the Tories ever won Hollinwood, albeit with a mean vote share of 39%. But this is what happens when the vote share of the principal party is pulled back down to earth by a diversifying field of candidates: you get perverse results won on low shares of the vote. It wasn't just Hollinwood: seven wards split their representation last year; the Conservatives are competitive in wards they haven't been able to win for ages, like **Royton North**, **Chadderton North** and **St James**'.

Who knows what'll happen in Hollinwood this time around? It is not one of Oldham's strongly Muslim wards so it may be hard for its independents to build up as much outrage over Gaza as elsewhere in the district. As the Tory winning share last year was already low any split is likely to flip it back to Labour.

There are only two Conservative seats up this year and both will be tight but they are just about favoured to hold on. In **Royton North** the Tory councillor with fewest votes beat Labour by twenty. But overall the Tories were seven points clear here which is a fairly decent margin to defend,



Their other seat up is in the vast, rural **Saddleworth South**, which split 2 Tories, one Lib Dem last year. This is the slightly better Conservative Saddleworth ward: prior to the Lib Dems nicking a seat in last year's all outs the Tories had won it the previous six times, so it should be defensible,

There are four Lib Dems up this year. Like its southern neighbour, **Saddleworth North** split

two Tories, one Lib Dem; just in a different order. This ward is more politically divided: the Lib Dem councillor's majority was 192, but not over the Tories: Labour filled the first non Lib Dem slot. The Tories trailed by 283, but of course aren't out of the running.

The Lib Dems should be safe in the third **Saddleworth ward: West and Lees**. But the same isn't so in **Shaw**, in the north of

the district. After a quarter of a century of electing Lib Dems, an independent topped the poll in 2023, and a second was only 39 votes off. They are more secure in **Crompton** - the western half of Shaw, though a 7% swing would elect another independent. Still, a gain straight out of Crompton is improbable.

Aside from the ex-Tory independent in Hollinwood, just one of the elected indies from

last year finished third and so faces the electorate again this year. That ward is **Failsworth East** and they won by just eight votes over Labour. This ward's elected independents four years in a row though, so they are at least evens to retain it.

Then there are the vulnerable Labour wards. For starters, while they are trying to win back Failsworth East, independents will be seeking to flip **Failsworth West**: they were 85 votes short last year. The independents in these two wards are more like a Residents' Association for Failsworth.

A different type of independent has shots in at least two other wards. These are the heavily Muslim inner city Oldham wards: **Coldhurst**, where they were 172 votes adrift, and **St Mary's** - 268 off. Both depend on how these areas respond to the Gaza crisis - but it seems likely there will be an independent option on the ballot.

The Conservatives have four (well, five if you regard Hollinwood as a chance for a regain) potentials over Labour.

One is **Chadderton North**, where they lost by 142. The Tories aren't entirely out of the picture in any of the three Chadderton wards but North is by far their best shot.

Then there is **Royton South**. This one is slightly odd because the party didn't stand here last year and an independent came top of the poll - possibly as a result of the Tories stepping aside. But they were just 3% behind in 2022 and 2021 so, as long as they contest it they should have as much chance as in Royton North - they're very similar demographically.

The Tories won a seat in St James' in 2019 and that councillor, Beth Sharp, topped the poll last year, alongside two Labour councillors. This ward has virtually no history of voting Conservative, but in the Lib Dem years here it elected councillors from that party, so perhaps that non-Labour vote has gradually coalesced behind the Tories. A second Conservative candidate was just 34 votes behind.

They have a far outside chance at **Waterhead** ward where they fell short by 404 votes. They need a 6.5% swing to win here and this is politically a similar ward to St James'. The Tories fielded just one candidate here last year.

Labour's Oldham majority is at risk this election. In part this is because their vote is increasingly fragmented: they only won 41%. They also have a lot of exposure - seats up - this year. And there is the impact of the Gaza conflict on a town with a large, concentrated Muslim

electorate. Ironically, given the Conservative councillors quit over Gaza, Labour might retain control by regaining Hollinwood.

Oxford

Current council

22 Lab, 9 LD, 6 Grn, 6 Soc, Ind 5 Seats up

12 Lab, 5 LD, 3 Soc, 2 Grn, 2 Ind

There have been a large number of defections since the 2023 elections - and some of these have removed parties from control of some councils. We've already seen this in Hastings, Burnley and Norwich. It's happened to the Conservatives in Peterborough, and brought Labour to the brink in Kirklees. And it's happened in Oxford.

That's quite a switch because, in 2022 when this city council last elected Labour held a majority of sixteen. There were two Labour councillors for every one in the combined opposition. Today Labour is ten seats down on that May 2022 tally.

Six have defected to the rather pretentiously named Oxford Socialist Independent Group (OSIG); three have formed the Independent Group (IG). There are two other independents, one of whom was elected as such in Temple Cowley and the other quit Labour over Gaza but

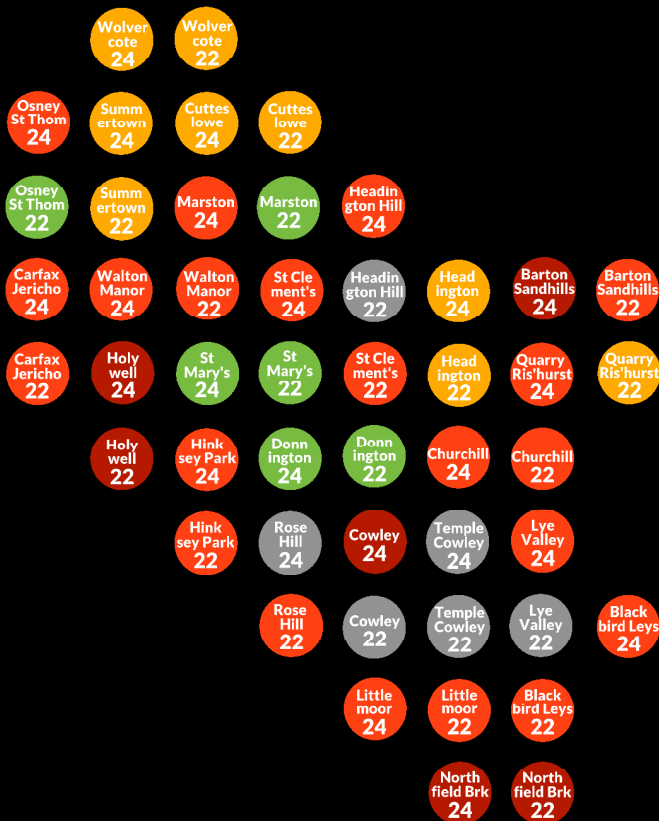
didn't want to join the two independent groups.

From local news coverage of the split, which happened in November, there are ideological differences between the two factions. OSIG presents itself as more progressive, more left-wing than Labour, citing the Gaza conflict but also a wide variety of complaints about Starmer Labour. The IG specifically cited the controversial traffic management measures being implemented (though this is an Oxfordshire County Council competence).

Half the OSIG group is up for election this year: seats in **Cowley, Holywell** and **Northfield Brook**; and two from the IG are as well. Labour therefore has a relatively straightforward path to regaining their majority.

Oxford isn't hugely ethnically diverse: even the more working class eastern side of the city is only 16% Asian. But it is packed to the rafters with the sort of progressive, academic class that the OSIG councillors epitomise, so there is some potential for them to frustrate Labour's quest to regain its majority.

There is also the Oxford Independent Alliance (OIA), founded principally to fight the LTN-Fifteen Minute City agenda of the two councils.



There are parallels here with the backlash to the broadly similar plans pushed by Labour in Cambridge - except there it manifested in a big swing to the Tories. There is far less likelihood of the Conservatives benefiting electorally in Oxford: they are even weaker here, polling just 8% across the city in 2022. Nonetheless, it is a potent source to mobilise anti-Labour votes.

Independents polled well in 2022 in Littlemore and Lye Valley, and were slightly further back in **Cowley** and **Headington Hill and Iffley**.

It isn't just independents that pose a threat to Labour, though the potential realignment in some of the wards that were close in 2022 will complicate things.

For example, the Greens were close in **Holywell** ward in 2022 - 133 votes short (though wards here are very small, so 133 means more here than it would in somewhere with huge wards like Leeds and Sheffield), But Holywell is now an OSIG ward. Will that put the Greens out of contention or help them with a split Labour-OSIG vote?

The Greens will also be targeting **Marston** and **Osney and St Thomas**: seats they gained in 2022 and are now split. There is no independent complication in these wards: it should be a straight Labour-Green contest.

The Lib Dems have been pushed back to four northern wards and they don't have any potential gains. Their only split ward seat in **Quarry Hill and Risinghurst** is up this year and, while councillors have the potential for big personal votes in such small wards, they lost to Labour in 2022 57% to 25%. A big gap.

There is too much chaos in Oxford to be confident in forecasting an outcome from what could be very messy elections. With all these new groupings: OSIG, IG and OIA, plus the established parties, there's more chance Labour will fail to regain its majority than that they'll succeed.

Pendle

Current council
13 Con, 10 Lab, 7 LD, 2 Ind, 1 vac
Seats up
6 Con, 3 Lab, 2 LD, 1 Ind

The vein of councils which could potentially be affected by Muslim anger extends to the Lancashire authority of Pendle: Nelson, Colne and Brierfield, plus a fair chunk of rugged countryside south of Clitheroe.

The erstwhile Labour candidate in the Rochdale by-election, Azhar Ali, represents this area on Lancashire County Council - he was leader of the Labour group there until his suspension from the party in the middle of the by-election campaign for espousing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Two formerly Labour councillors, both representing Brierfield wards, resigned from the party separately over Gaza.

Pendle is a long-term marginal, both locally and nationally. Occasionally one party or the other pulls ahead but is soon reined in again. Nelson and Colne was one of the famous names of general elections past because it changed hands frequently.

Then it looked more solid during the Thatcher era before the Poll Tax, which had an especially unfair impact on places like this with compact, tightly packed, low-rated terraces suddenly paying much more Community Charge. That boosted Labour throughout the Blair years. But it returned to the Tories, sometimes with five figure majorities, sometimes much closer.

In recent years Pendle council has teetered between a very slim Conservative majority and no overall control - which has meant a Labour-Lib Dem coalition. This is how things are right now: the Tories are four seats short of a majority.

They will not get that majority back this year - they would need to win pretty much every seat up for election. Instead, they find themselves defending half the seats, and they'll be doing remarkably well to hold them.

The most vulnerable Conservative seat is **Earby and Coates**, one of the rural wards - where the Lib Dems hold the other two seats. The Conservative seat is the vacancy listed in the dash-board.

The Lib Dems also hold Barnoldswick securely and there is a Conservative seat up in Water-side and Horsfield (Colne). The Lib Dems won a seat here easily enough last year but so far the ward has gone the same as

it did in the all-out elections in 2021. In other words, there are two Tories and one Lib Dem here, and the Lib Dem has a big personal vote, so last year's result may not be reflective of what will happen this.

The final Liberal Democrat seat up is in single-councillor Fence and Higham, which was incredibly close in 2021: just thirty votes separated them from the Conservatives. This ward has less than 2,000 electors so, though it's rural, there is a good chance for the councillor to do what Lib Dems do best: touting their credentials as hard-working representatives.

Labour is favoured in **Marsden and Southfield** (Nelson South). The Conservatives won all three seats in 2021 but Labour has won two of them since. Labour was about ten points ahead in the 2023 round - which isn't beyond reach for the Tories but makes it likely the ward will go fully Labour unless someone splits their vote.

Bradley (Nelson West) is split two Conservative, one Labour and it is a Labour seat up this year. The Conservatives won last year by 401 votes, a fairly comfortable margin; and they gained a Labour seat in 2022 so perhaps they start as favourites here too.

Barrowford and Pendleside, Boulsworth and Foulridge, and

Vivary Bridge should be secure for the Conservatives.

Both Brierfield wards should be safe for Labour but there is the issue of the defectors here.

The one in Brierfield East and Clover Hill: Naeem Ashraf is up for election this year. Labour polled 72.5% last year so it looks very safe but it might be vulnerable if their vote is split by independents.

The independent in Brierfield West and Reedley is not up for election but both Brierfield wards are demographically similar with big Muslim populations. Again, this should be very secure for Labour.

Finally there is Whitefield and Walverden (Brierfield North) which is similar to the two wards above: Labour won here by 66% last year.

Bundled up, the Conservatives should find themselves a couple of seats further from a majority in Pendle after these elections. But Labour may also have a smaller group depending on the havoc their problems over Gaza wreaks.

Peterborough

Current council

**22 Con, 14 Lab, 11 First, 8 LD
2 Grn, 3 Ind**

Seats up

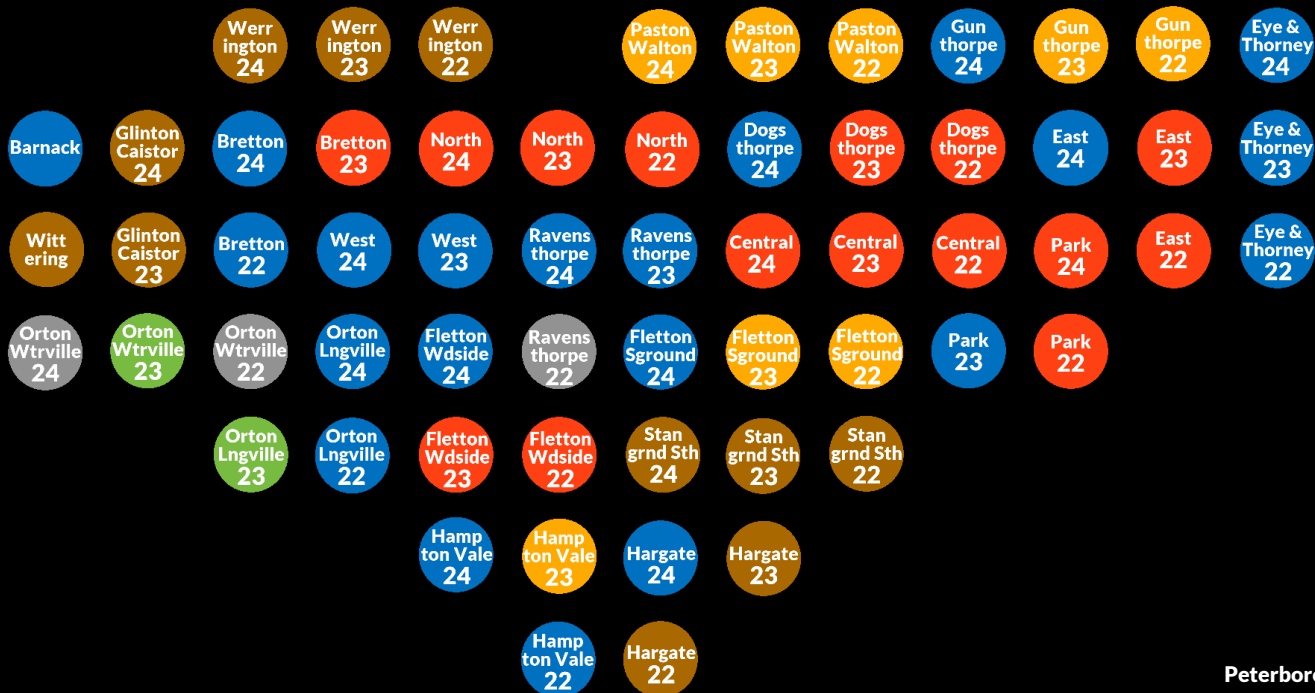
**13 Con, 4 First, 3 Lab,
1 LD, 1 Ind**

Last year the Conservatives did pretty well in Peterborough. They gained two seats off Labour and, while this wasn't enough to regain control of the city, it got them to parity: 30 Conservatives, 30 for all other parties (and there are a few here!)

Then it all started to go wrong. Since 2004, a residents group called Werrington First has held the ward of that name. Suddenly rebranded as Peterborough First, four Conservatives switched shortly after the elections. Three more defected in July. An eight Conservative crossed the council chamber in December over Gaza.

It is perhaps a sign of how inately Conservative Peterborough district is that, despite losing eight seats and falling to their lowest number of councillors here since 1996, they still have eight councillors more than Labour, and twice as many as the now Tory-swollen Peterborough First.

This may seem anomalous given that Peterborough is one of the



Peterborough

most marginal parliamentary constituencies around. The explanation is that the city council covers a much larger area than the constituency: Peterborough is close to meriting two whole seats within it. There are plenty of Tory Peterborough wards in the North West Cambridgeshire constituency.

There is no chance for the Conservatives to claw their way back to a majority, or close to it. Even after defections, thirteen Tory seats are up for re-election this year; just four Firsts are up and only three Labour.

Nine of the Conservative seats are in wards that have elected candidates from other parties since the Tory won in 2021. There's also **Ravensthorpe** with its defector to independent.

Local elections in Peterborough have been quite volatile for several years. There are now six affiliations represented and councillors seemed relaxed switching sides before the mass defection to First: the longest-serving Green councillor resigned shortly after being re-elected in 2022 for no apparent reason: she said she just wanted to step back from party politics.

How to unscramble this egg? Let's start with the wards that have First councillors.

Their councillors are up for election in **Glington and Caistor**, **Stanground South**, **Werrington** and **Wittering**: a rural single councillor ward in the east of the authority. All three of the ex-Tory First wards were among the safest held by the Tories.

The **Stanground South** councillor up is Chris Harper who is leader of the group but not of the council (that is Mohammed Farooq of **Hargate and Hempsted** - not up for election until 2027).

There is a certain degree of mendacity about these First councillors defecting the moment after being elected as Conservatives. It's simply not credible that it suddenly dawned on them right after the election that they were in the wrong party - it was planned; they just wanted the help of the party they intended to shaft to win re-election first.

Because these First wards - excluding Werrington - were so safely Conservative they should start as favourites to recapture them, but who knows how much personal vote or non-partisan appeal this new party will have?

Then there is **Hargate and Hempsted**. Two of the ward's councillors have defected to First but not the one up this May: Nicolle Trust. That's not a bad name for a politician seeking re-election and it'll be interesting to see whether First will just be a vehicle for incumbents or can expand its reach, especially in the ward of the council leader.

Hargate and Hempsted has been Conservative since it was created in 2016, though only by 126 votes last year (over Labour). So three groups could win.

Then there are two wards which are otherwise Lib Dem but with a Conservative seat up this year. These are **Fletton and Stan-ground**, which should be safe, and **Gunthorpe**, where they were 313 ahead last year.

The Lib Dems hold a seat in **Hampton Vale** that elected last year - but this seems to be an anomalous councillor with a large personal vote in a ward that otherwise votes Tory. They may win but the Tories were ten points ahead in 2022 and fourteen ahead in 2021.

There is a longer-term Lib Dem ward, **Paston and Walton**, but they haven't locked it down: they were just 239 ahead last year. The longer run picture is that this was a Labour ward, then Tory for a while before the

Lib Dems gained it, and it even voted UKIP once.

The secure Green Party ward is **Orton Waterville** which they've held in five successive elections and where they polled almost 70% last year.

Last year they gained a seat in **Orton Longueville** but, again, this may be anomalous. The councillor who won was first elected as Labour. Labour failed to win the other two Longueville seats in 2021 or 2022, though they were only nineteen shy in 2022. Accounting for the personal vote of the ex Labour Green last year the Tories may just start favourites here with Labour and Greens splitting the opposition vote. There are no other Green targets.

Two of the three Labour seats are safe unless the party gets some independent challenges over Gaza. Park should be Labour too but is both more marginal and more erratic: the Tories gained a seat here last year after losing 53-32 in 2022. These are all wards in the centre of Peterborough with large Muslim populations.

What of the Conservative seats? Some of what might happen depends on whether First fields candidates in seats they don't hold because they're more likely to split the Tory vote. But **Barnack**, **Eye**, **Thorney and Newborough**, and **West** should be safe.

Bretton is more marginal, and Labour gained a seat here last year by 78 votes - the Tories held the 2022 seat fairly comfortably.

Fletton and Woodston is also very marginal. Labour won here by just twelve votes last year and by sixty-eight in 2022 while the Tories won by eighty-six in 2021.

Plymouth

Current council
33 Lab, 15 Con, 7 Ind, 2 Grn
Seats up
9 Con, 6 Lab, 3 Ind, 1 Grn

Plymouth is about to swing, in the space of just two years, from a narrow Conservative majority to a massive Labour one.

It's also, in some ways, a reassurance that every so often people vote on local issues, not just the relative popularity of the party in government nationally.

The Conservatives were routed from power last year following the late night demolition of an avenue of over a hundred mature trees along Armada Way. That the Tory leadership thought that doing this in March, just before the elections, and in the middle of the night, to avoid protests, was a clever idea suggests they were right to be defeated.

They weren't just defeated: the Tories held just one seat last year, losing seven. City-wide, Labour beat them by twenty points. The last time the Conservatives lost by anything like that margin was 1995.

The one they managed to hang onto: Plymstock Radford, they won by just 231 votes, on just 35% of the vote. In other words, none of their seats can be guaranteed this year.

After the election things got worse for the Tories. They lost two further seats in by-elections, in Plymstock Dunstone to Labour, and Plympton Chaddlewood to the Greens. And two further councillors defected to independent over disputes with the Tory group.

There are three sets of independents now. Two were elected in Plympton last year. There is an independent group of three former Tories. And there are two "Free Independents" - one elected in Drake last year and one another ex Tory from Honicknowle.

This churn means that the Tories who, without defections and by-elections would have had to defend fourteen seats, now have only nine seats up. Three of the ex-Tory independents are up and the Green who won the by-election is back before the voters too.

Given how out of favour the Conservatives are in this city it's unlikely they can win any of the six Labour seats, or the Green. Can they get any of their former seats back from independents - in Ham, Honicknowle and Plympton Erle? Well, not on the basis of last year's disaster; and if the independents contest their seats they'll split the Tory vote and guarantee they won't hold on.

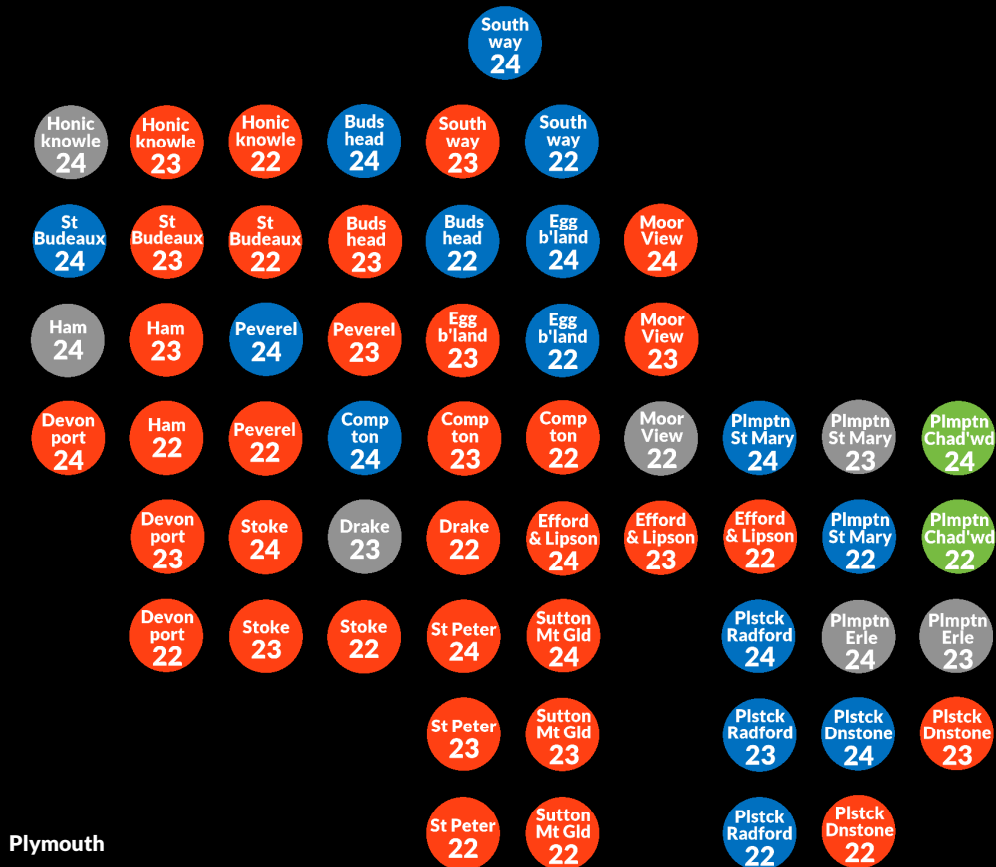
It's essentially the same story for the remaining nine Tories given they lost the seats in the same wards last year by pretty big margins:

- Budshead 5.1%
- Compton 11.1%
- St Budeaux 11.4%
- Egguckland 11.7%
- Moor View 12.1%
- Southway 15.8%
- Plymstock Dunstone 20.6%
- Peverell 28.0%
- Plympton St Mary 29.4%

Assuming they can hold Plymstock Radford, Budshead looks like the easiest to hold. The next four all have similar majorities requiring a swing back (from last year) of between 5.6% and 6.1%.

The last four, and especially Peverell and Plympton St Mary look all-but impossible for them to defend. But to be clear: they'll all be very difficult given the national and local environment.

If things stay as bad as they were last year for the Tories



Plymouth

then their group, which was 31 councillors strong in 2021, could fall to just six. They held just five in 1996 but otherwise the Conservatives have never been brought so low.

Portsmouth

Current council
18 LD, 9 Ind, 8 Con, 7 Lab
Seats up
6 LD, 5 Con, 2 Lab, 1 Ind

One of the headline themes emerging from these local elections is the fragmentation of traditional party votes and the emergence of a far more diverse political battleground.

It's not merely the fairly recent fissure in Labour caused by the Gaza conflict, or the disaffection of Corbynite Labour councillors with the direction of the party.

The trend has been occurring since the SDP Liberal Alliance

burst onto the scene in 1982. Before then, the vast majority of contests were straight Labour-Conservative fights; or Independent Tory fights in the more remote shires. Liberals fielded candidates sporadically and it was a source of wonder when they actually won. The Alliance breakthrough created a three-party battle in many parts of the country by fielding vastly more candidates,

Their demise and the birthing pains of the Liberal Democrats in the late 1980s gave the first burst of impetus for the Green Party, which managed to finish second in eight constituencies in

the 1989 European elections. In more recent elections the Greens have begun to be viewed as the natural party of opposition to Conservatives in rural areas where Labour has never posed a serious threat; and to a lesser extent in more urban areas where the Conservative, then Lib Dem challenge faded.

Arguably they are doing less well in Labour areas at present because that party is in opposition nationally so there is less motivation to protest against them - we shall see if or when Labour returns to government.

But there also seems to be far more motivation to organise non-party challenges on councils. There has been a surge in regionalist parties like the Yorkshire Party, and parties called [placename] First. For years the only Residents Association run council in England was Epsom and Ewell.

Today, independents and residents have majorities in Uttlesford, Castle Point and Tandridge, and a share of power in districts like Tunbridge Wells and Guildford - and that's before taking into account the

councils we've recently looked at like Hastings, Peterborough and Oxford.

A similar thing is happening in Portsmouth. Until the 1984

Portsmouth South by-election, the town had been a straight Conservative-Labour fight with the Tories miles ahead.

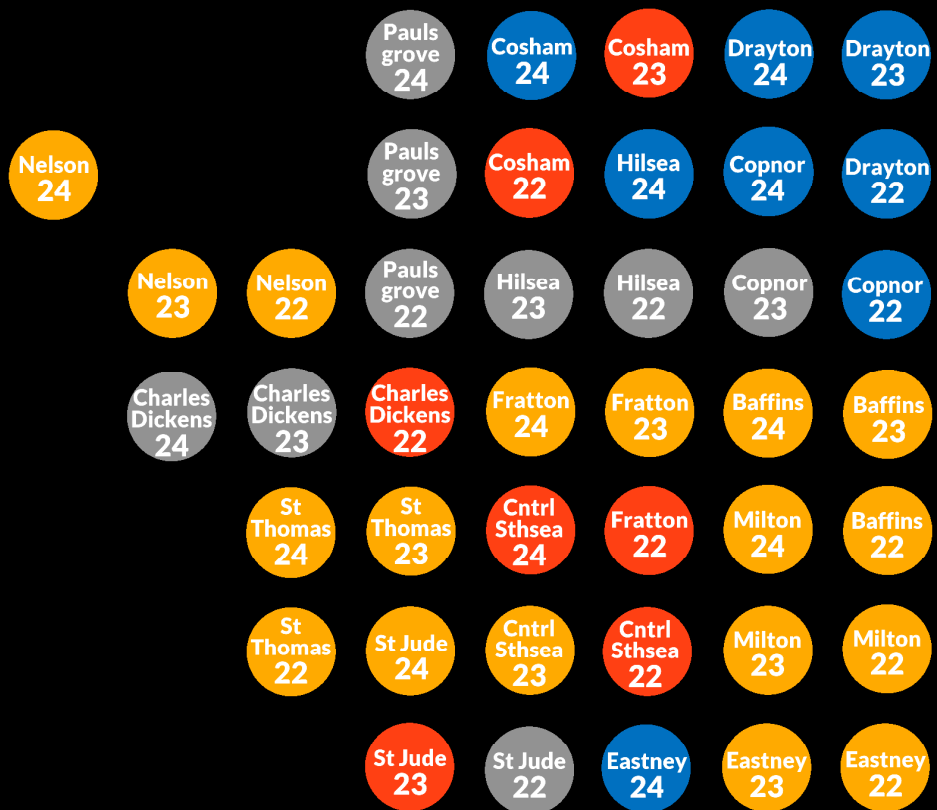
Following Mike Hancock's first gain of the constituency, the Alliance vote surged from 14% to 34% in the 1986 local

elections, pushing Labour into third place borough-wide. There have been fluctuations but the centre vote has been between 22% and 36% most elections since. Last year they polled 29% - and that was higher than Labour and Conservative.

An inkling that even this three-party triopoly was insufficient for voters came in 2014 when UKIP won six of the fourteen seats up (Portsmouth went on to vote 58% Leave in the EU referendum which may seem

anti-intuitive for a strongly Lib Dem city but the two are entirely unlinked.

In the 2015 general election that almost completely purged the country of Liberal Democrat MPs, Portsmouth South went Conservative. But this was an interregnum: the Tories lost the seat - but to Labour. It has often been the case that when Labour supersedes the Lib Dems the centre party fades quickly. But not here.



Labour has had only two long-term Portsmouth wards: Charles Dickens and Paulsgrove. Now they broke through in Central Southsea, Fratton and St Jude - but they locked none of these wards down and lost Paulsgrove.

Partly because they faced different opponents in different parts: Labour in the north, drawn from the party's strength in the huge Paulsgrove council estate; and Lib Dems in the south, the Conservatives have struggled in council elections.

But in the last few elections independents have become a factor. They started off winning in Paulsgrove, no longer a Labour fief, and hold all three seats there now.

In 2022 Hilsea joined Paulsgrove in electing independents, here beating the Tory incumbent by 22 votes with 36% of the vote.

Then, last year, the independents stood for the first time. They contested every ward and won Charles Dickens, Copnor, Hilsea and Paulsgrove. Independents polled 18% across Portsmouth but 49% in the wards they won.

Three of the four were gained from the Tories; one from Labour. In Lib Dem-held wards other than Baffins, independents performed very poorly suggesting that an indie vote

was an anti-Tory vote, and perhaps that voters found Labour wanting as a vessel for those votes.

As well as the independent gains, Labour took a second seat from the Conservatives in Cosham ward on the mainland. The Lib Dems took a seat from the Tories in Eastney and Craneswater - the far south east of Southsea Island.

There is only one safe Tory ward left in Portsmouth: Drayton and Farlington, and even here they won less than 50%. But then this isn't a council of safe wards: they are all competitive and getting more so.

Six wards, all on the island, are Lib Dem-Labour fights; a seventh (Eastney) is a three-way battle based on 2023. Four of the six are split. And three of those four were won with less than 40% of the vote last year.

There is a high probability that the Conservatives will lose the same seats they lost last year and that will leave them with just four councillors in total - their lowest number ever.

Labour could actually fail to win a single seat. They won two in 2021: Charles Dickens, whose councillor has already switched to independents; and Central Southsea, which the Lib Dems won last year by seven percentage points.

But they should get seats in Cosham and St Jude (let's not make too much of the fact St Jude is the patron saint of hopeless causes!) so net zero for them (based on 2021 changes).

This would leave something like nineteen Lib Dems, eleven independents, eight Labour and four Conservatives, with Lib Dems four short of a majority.

Preston

Current council

31 Lab, 10 Con, 7 LD

Seats up

10 Lab, 5 Con, 1 LD

Preston is a council with a very safe Labour centre and far more competitive wards surrounding this core. Just over one in five voters are from a South West Asian ethnicity and, again, they are concentrated in a handful of city centre wards: Deepdale, Fishwick and Frenchwood, Plungington and St Matthew's.

There have been no defections over Gaza or anything else yet.

The Conservatives won five wards in 2021 and they will probably lose three of them: Greyfriars and Ingol and Cottam to the Liberal Democrats, and Sharoe Green to Labour. So poor was the Tory result in Sharoe Green last year that, in a ward they had never before lost, they came third.

In fact the Tories only finished 104 votes ahead in Preston Rural North so there's a slim chance they could be left with just Preston Rural East.

Labour won the wards it already held by astounding margins last year: an 87% vote in Deepdale, 81% in St Matthew's, 77% in Plungington; 73% in Ribbleton; 72% in Brookfield. They "only" won three others with shares in the sixties.

So the only likely outcome here is an increase in Labour's already huge majority - unless, that is, there is some reaction by the electorate in those very safe Labour wards to Gaza.

Reading

Current council

32 Lab, 7 Grn, 5 Con, 3 LD, 1 Ind

Seats up

12 Lab, 2 Grn, 1 Con, 1 LD

Labour now holds a two-to-one majority in Reading and the Conservatives could lose their only seat up this year.

Last year they held **Emmer Green** by exactly 100 votes and **Kentwood** by 155, both over Labour.

This is shockingly poor for a party that holds one of the Reading parliamentary seats (albeit that a lot of their votes

come from suburban wards beyond the city limits) and should be competitive in the other.

But the EU referendum realigned the country. Reading voted 58% to Remain in the EU and, just as affluent pro-EU London wards have abandoned the Conservatives, so have affluent commuter districts ringing the capital.

Things have got so bad for the Conservatives that the Green Party is now the principal opposition. They have seats in three eastern wards: **Park, Redlands** and **Katesgrove** but Park is the only relatively safe one.

This year a Labour seat is up in Katesgrove (9.6% Green majority last year), and a Green seat is up in Redlands (6.2% Labour majority last year). These are straight Labour Green battles: everyone else gets tiny vote shares in these three wards.

The Lib Dems are embedded in **Tilehurst** ward but they have no prospects anywhere else: in most wards they came last.

The Conservatives only have a shot at **Caversham Heights**, where Labour gained a seat last year but only by 130 votes. This year a Labour seat is up for election here. They also have a shot at a Labour seat in

Kentwood. Every other Labour seat is safe.

It's possible that nothing changes in Reading this year: that everyone hold what they have. Whatever does happen, Reading will remain red.

Redditch

Current council

16 Con, 12 Lab, 1 LD

Seats up

All - boundary changes

Before the 2019 council elections the Tories had not won a majority in Redditch since 1979.

Then the district swung so rapidly their way that, by 2021 they held a majority of nineteen on a council with only twenty nine seats. That year - the year the seats that would have been up for election this year were it not for boundary changes - the Tories won all nine seats up for election.

Last year, with Brexit passions fading and voters more annoyed with the Tories than Labour, things were much closer. Labour won six seats, the Tories just four. Labour won the popular vote by 7 percentage points.

A rerun of 2023 in 2024 would have returned control of Redditch to Labour. That is still the likely outcome but, as I've

said, there are boundary changes being implemented this year so the whole council is up for election.

This already small council is shrinking by two seats to just 27, so 14 are needed for a majority.

Three of the four wards the Conservatives won last year all broadly survive intact. They are **Astwood Bank** and **Feckenham, Webheath** and **Callow Hill** and **Winyates**. All Redditch wards now have three councillors, so that's nine Conservatives.

The fourth, Crabbs Cross, has been subsumed into two of those other Tory wards.

Headless Cross and Oakenshaw voted Labour - just - last year, but Conservative in 2022, and had always been Tory until 2023, so they have a decent chance of winning it back. That might get them to twelve seats.

The problem for the Tories is that, based on last year's results, everything else is likely to go Labour. That's not a huge win for Labour: fifteen seats to twelve, and it assumes no wards split. It may be that some of the Conservative incumbents have sufficient personal votes to hold on, even in the face of resurgent Labour. They only need to hold seats in two other wards to retain control.

But that's only possible if the Tories close that pretty big gap in votes from last year. And there's not much sign that there's any difference from last year.

Reigate and Banstead

Current council

22 Con, 11 Grn, 6 Res, 3 LD, 2 Ind, 1 Lab

Seats up

9 Con, 3 Grn, 2 Res, 1 LD, 1 Ind

Earlier this year the Conservatives lost their majority on the last Surrey district they held.

What a remarkable fact!

The Conservatives have been struggling here since 2019. They had been winning vote shares in the mid to high forty percentiles since 2000: more than enough to give them a big majority in this extremely affluent North Downs district.

But in 2019 their vote crashed from 49.6% to just 33.1% - all of it going to the Greens. Since then, 46% in the Tories' 2021 golden year, but 36.6% in 2022 and 37.8% last year. In 2018 their council majority stood at 31 seats; today it's three. Soon it will likely be zero.

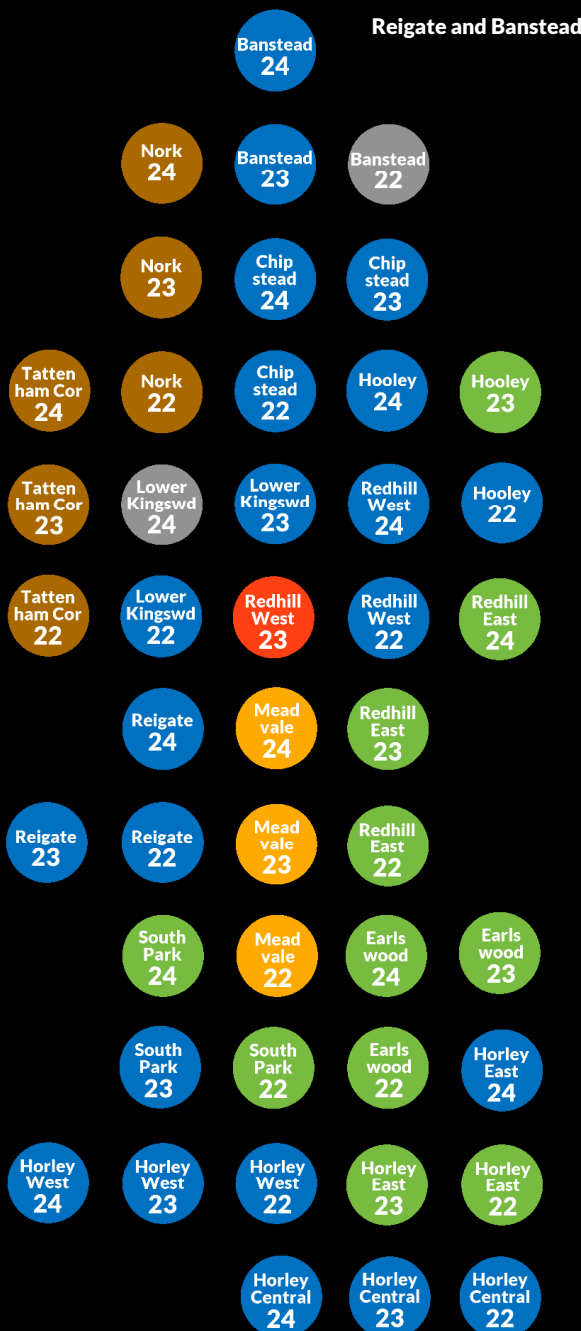
This is the only district in Surrey in which the Greens have any consequential presence. They

won their first seat in 2000, in **Redhill East** ward. In 2018 they added **Earlswood and Whitebushes**, and in the past three years **Hooley, Horley East**, and **South Park**. There are still four non-Green seats in these latter wards so, without bringing anywhere else into play, they could soon have a group of fifteen: one third of the council.

The Conservatives face a panoply of opposition parties across the district. Residents Association councillors hold the two wards adjoining Epsom and Ewell in the north: **Nork** and **Tattenham Corner**. The Green Party strength is down the eastern side of the district.

There is one fairly secure Lib Dem ward: **Meadvale and St John's** and, in a measure of how poorly the Tories turned their diminishing vote out in 2023, Labour even managed to win a seat in Redhill West and Wray Common last year.

To be fair to Labour, Reigate and Banstead isn't quite the electoral desert it has appeared in recent years. As recently as the 1990s they had as many as fourteen councillors here. But barring the seat they won in 2023, all the wards Labour used to win now elect Green councillors. Even **Redhill West** they won with only 36%, with Greens and Lib Dems between them taking 30%.



There are reasons Reigate and Banstead has held out longer as a Conservative bastion than the rest of Surrey. The eastern side of the county; here and Tandridge, were the only two Surrey districts that voted Leave in the EU referendum. So there is a smaller Remain vote to mobilise against the Tories than in areas to the west. Yet it also is not the sort of area to embrace UKIP: they only won one seat here at their peak.

This is also probably the weakest district for the Lib Dems in Surrey. That large Labour group years ago blocked the Lib Dems from establishing itself here as it has in next door Mole Valley, for example.

And, while there has always been a large-ish non Tory vote, it hasn't found a home since Labour faded from the scene. It's been floating around. Until recently, that is.

How things go this year will depend on two things: whether there is any consequential upswing in Conservative fortunes nationally; and whether local Tories prove better at getting their vote out in key wards - now their vulnerabilities have been exposed.

Although the Greens will be favourites to take Tory seats in **Hooley, Merstham and Netherne**, and **Horley East and Salfords**, their wins last year were tight: 212 and 165 respectively.

The Conservatives also staved off the Greens from taking a third seat in **South Park and Woodhatch** last year. This year one of the two Green councillors is up for re-election and it would help the Tory cause no end to take a seat back after years of being pushed back.

Labour will be trying to give their solitary councillor someone to keep him company. They won **Redhill West** by just 29 votes last year so it will be tough - and they'll only achieve it if the vote remains split.

Labour has a (very) remote chance in Hooley as well - again because the vote is so fragmented. They polled 23% last year as the Greens won with 38% and the Tories took 29%. If the Greens fall off, Labour might benefit, but it's a big gap they need to close.

They're also not completely out of the picture in **Horley Central** but again, it's incredibly unlikely they can win in a ward that's never voted for them.

The two Residents Association wards are safe: 57% and 63% vote shares last year.

All told, it's not impossible for the Tories to hold Reigate and Banstead by the skin of their teeth - especially if they can flip that Green seat in South Park.

The Greens just need to take the two Conservative seats in

Horley East and Hooley and hold South Park to take this council to no overall control - and that task is slightly easier than the Tories in the current political climate.

Rochdale

Current council

45 Lab, 9 Con, 3 LD, 2 Ind, 1 vac

Seats up

15 Lab, 3 Con, 1 LD, 1 Ind

The epicentre of Labour's latest (self-inflicted) bout of fratricide over Gaza is, of course, Rochdale.

The party's suspension of its by-election candidate, Azhar Ali, because of remarks he made in a private meeting about Israel, turbo-charged George Galloway's campaign.

In the aftermath of similar by-election campaigns he fought in Bethnal Green and Bow, Bradford West and Batley and Spen Galloway created a "wake" the way a powerboat does in water.

It was weakest in Batley and that was probably because he lost that by-election. In Tower Hamlets, however, it can be argued that his impact is still being felt in the success of Mayor Lufur Rahman and his Tower Hamlets First party.

So it's entirely plausible that Galloway's success here, and Labour's disastrous fourth place, will have a major impact on the local elections. That the by-election occurred so close to the local elections matters. Batley and Spen occurred in July 2021 so there were ten months before the subsequent local elections - time for some of the toxicity of the by-election to diminish.

Bradford West, however, occurred in March 2012 - just weeks before the city's local election. Galloway's presence as the seat's MP, plus the fact it had only just happened led to Respect Party council gains.

Despite their troubles at parliamentary level, these have not, at the time of writing at least, fed through to council level.

Let's set aside any upheaval there may or may not be and just look at the council as it was in 2023.

By the way, there is - or should be - interest beyond the Rochdale constituency half of Rochdale district.

One of the most surprising Conservative gains of the 2019 general election was Heywood and Middleton: the western side of the district. In the 2014 H&M by-election the Conservatives hadn't come close: in fact it was UKIP that nearly gained the

seat. But in 2019 the Tories snatched it by 663 votes.

Unfortunately for the Tories, there has been no follow-through among the Heywood and Middleton council wards.

There are two safe Conservative wards in H&M: **Bamford** and **Norden**. A large part of the reason the Tories were able to win the constituency was huge turnout in those two and low turnout coupled with a diminished Labour vote in the Labour wards. But the wards have stayed Labour, even middle income **Castleton** and affluent **South Middleton**.

The best Conservative chances, however, are on the Rochdale side - not in Rochdale itself but Littleborough. They easily win **Wardle, Shore and West Littleborough** and have a real shot at its neighbour: **Littleborough Lakeside**.

Last year Labour regained the one Tory seat in this ward, but by just seven votes, and there was no Conservative incumbent to boost their vote either. It'll be tough to claw back a Labour seat in this ward but not impossible.

Labour only won Castleton last year with 39% of the vote, an eighteen point drop in their vote over 2022. The Conservatives were only on 21% and a new independent won 19%. When it was part of Rochdale consti-

uency, Castleton was part of the Lib Dem phalanx so the ward has a history of not supporting Labour, but those days are fading fast.

There are no other opportunities for the Tories in the borough - that is without a new actor like the Workers Party of Britain, or organised Gaza independents splitting Labour's vote.

There are three other potentially problematic wards for Labour, based on 2023.

When Rochdale was a Liberal constituency, most of the town's wards elected Liberal councillors.

There is just one Lib Dem ward left, and again the seat is in Littleborough, not Rochdale town: **Milnrow and Newhey**. They're not totally secure here: Labour was only 360 votes behind after a big swing their way, but it's been Lib Dem for decades.

But last year the Lib Dems came close in **Spotland and Falinge**, the western suburbs of Rochdale town. The Lib Dems last won this ward in 2008 and, after a 7% swing lost by 336 votes last year. This happens to be the first ward the Liberals won in Rochdale, back in 1973, and their longest-held ward, so there is a strong tradition here.

The rest of Rochdale town is - or has been until now - very safely Labour. The party polled 73% in **Central Rochdale**, 69% in **Healey** (North Rochdale) and **Kingsway** (South East Rochdale), and 80% in **Milkstone and Deepish** (South West Rochdale). But these are the wards that produced a huge vote for Galloway.

The last two wards in which Labour is struggling are **East Middleton** and **North Middleton**. In the all-out elections of 2022, Independents won five of the six seats in these two wards. Labour regained one apiece last year - in East Middleton by a huge amount (62/27) but more closely in North Middleton.

It's reasonable to regard the independent vote in these two wards as proxies for Conservatives: most of their votes would have gone Tory in the general election. There's very little Tory vote in either ward for the independents to annex so the battle here will be one of degrees of enthusiasm between Labour and anti-Labour voters.

Even if there is a backlash among Muslim voters in Rochdale itself, there is no threat to Labour's majority on the council - which was 22 seats. Unless, that is, some Labour councillors not up for election this year defect.

But let's not blow this potential out of proportion: there are only

five wards with a large enough minority ethnic electorate to influence the electoral outcome on this narrow platform which has little impact on day to day lives in Rochdale. Rochdale is not Tower Hamlets and it is not Bradford. But even relatively small inroads into the Labour vote in some wards could start flipping wards away from them.

Rochford

Current council

12 Con, 9 LD, 8 Ind,
7 Res, 2 Ind Con, 1 Grn

Seats up

5 Con, 4 Ind, 2 LD, 1 Res, 1 Ind Con

Rochford is yet another council whose councillors seem to believe they can change allegiance on a whim, regardless of how locals have voted.

If councillors stuck to the colours beneath which they had been elected there would be nineteen Tories, not twelve; ten residents and just three independents instead of ten.

Five of these turncoats are up for election this year, two from the usually safe Tory wards of Foulness and The Wakerings, and Roche South. But we can't say for certain that the Tories will regain them because, if the independent Conservatives contest the seats they could split them just enough for

Labour to win. Labour was short by 51 in Roche North and 152 in Roche South.

Labour cannot win the South-end East and Rochford constituency without polling decently in the Rochford half so they will need to put some effort in.

For the council that, in the main, covers the seventh safest Conservative seat in the country (Rayleigh and Wickford) the Tories are in some difficulty. Last year they polled just 33%, a figure that compares with 61% they won in 2008. They haven't been this weak since the run up to the 1997 general election.

In fact three of the five Conservative seats won last year weren't in Rayleigh (Wickford's part of neighbouring Basildon district): they were in the Rochford constituency: Roche North, Roche South and Foulness. It's actually a measure of the resilience of the Tory vote that they won as many as five seats in such a poor year.

There are six affiliations (in fact eight, as the independents are split into three sets, and that's not counting the two independent Conservatives) on the council, but voters began clarifying matters last year: just five Tories, four Lib Dems, three Residents and one independent were elected.

Twenty seats are required for a majority, so there is no prospect

Rossendale

Current council

21 Lab, 9 Con, 2 First,

1 Grn, 1 Ind, 1 vac

Seats up

All: boundary changes

Rossendale is another finely balanced Lancashire district.

In 2021 Labour won Cribden by 45, Eden and Greensclough by 57, Hareholme by 74, Irwell by 68 and Longholme by 99. The Tories won Goodshaw by 60 and Whitewell by 104. There is no council with more knife-edge battles than Rossendale.

In 2021 both Labour and the Tories polled 46% yet Labour won almost twice the seats. This is because Labour distributes its vote better: the Tories tend to win their smaller number of wards by more.

Since then Labour has opened up a lead district-wide: they were 3.6% ahead in 2022 and 10.4% ahead last year. That enabled Labour to win eight seats to two Conservatives, and open up a comfortable majority on the council: eight seats.

As is becoming repetitive, the likelihood this year is that the Tories will fall back further, especially as the whole council is up for election. Indeed, with so many knife-edge wards, the Conservatives could lose most

of the Conservatives regaining it this year. In fact they'll do well not to slip back further: they are defending seats in three wards that were split by the voters: Hawkwell East, Hockley and Trinity.

Trinity looks an almost certain Lib Dem gain - they won here last year 58% to 35%. The Lib Dem vote rose by thirty five percentage points (on their 2019 share). Likewise, Hockley has two Residents councillors and that grouping won it 60% to 25% last year. But Hawkwell East is much closer: the Residents won it by 77 last year, though that was their second gain in a Conservative ward.

There are then five wards where the councillors elected in 2021 were Conservatives but the party defending them this year is not.

We've already briefly covered Foulness and Roche South. In addition, Hawkwell West is now held by Residents, Lodge by the Lib Dems, and Sweyne Park is independent. Of these, Lodge is the only seat they might reclaim: they won it last year, if only by fifty eight votes.

The Conservatives will do well to emerge as the largest group on this council. It's not impossible that they'll end up with only the third largest number of councillors, though the independents will probably fare worse.

of their seats even while doing relatively alright in vote share.

Things are further complicated because all the two-councillor wards are abolished and the council is reduced by six seats to just thirty. Not only do we have a set of incredibly marginal wards where, at least in theory, the transfer of two or three streets between wards could change the result, there are big changes with some wards significantly enlarged and others abolished.

There is - sorry: was - only one reasonably secure Conservative ward: **Helmshore**.

Bacup is the new name for most of Greensclough ward. This currently has two Labour and an independent councillor, but the Tories are still competitive.

Britannia and Lee Mill is a new creation running through three wards: Stacksteads, Irwell and the remainder of Greensclough, Irwell and Stacksteads are two of Labour's safest wards, so we can assume this too will return three Labour councillors easily.

Likewise, **Goodshaw and Cribden** in the north of the district unites two fairly strongly Labour wards.

The Conservatives have a better chance in **Greenfield and Eden**. Both of these wards nearly always elected Tory councillors, though Greenfield did not in

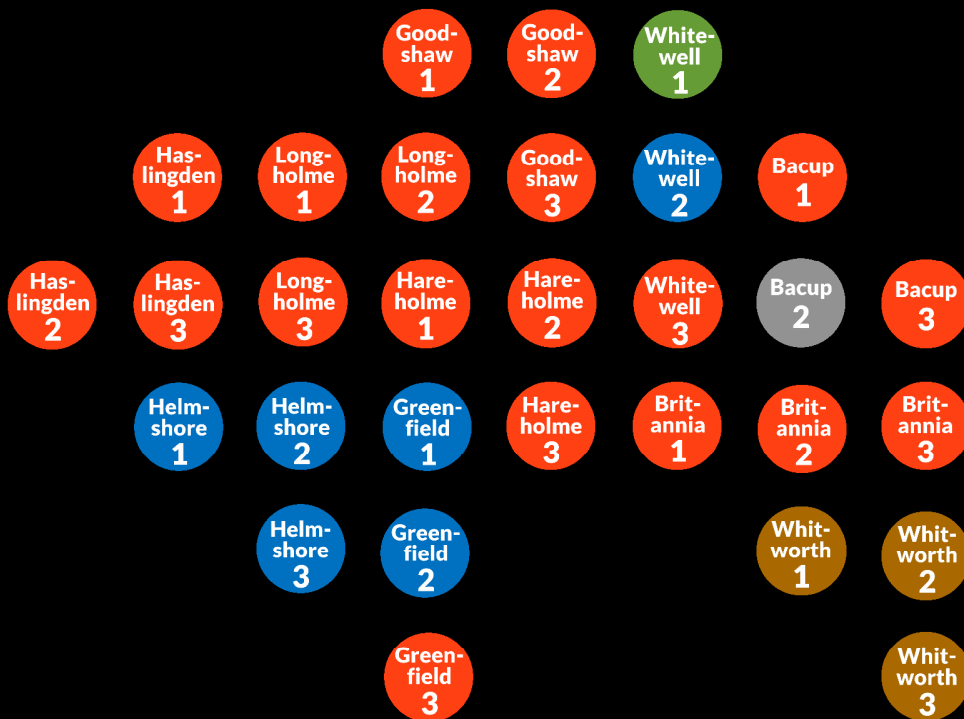
2023 and Eden did not in 2021. Eden extends like a fender between pretty strongly Tory parts of Bury (to the west) and Heywood & Middleton (to the east). Even if the party is being routed nationally, this new ward should return at least two Conservative councillors.

Hareholme and Waterfoot takes pretty much all of safe Labour Hareholme and the southern quarter of Whitewell, which elected a Green (formerly Labour) councillor in 2023. This one should stay Labour, though the Conservatives are stronger in Whitewell.

Haslingden is the new name for Worsley ward in the north-west of the district. It was already a 3-councillor ward and isn't much altered, so this will stay Labour. Likewise, **Longholme** in the middle of the district has elected Labour councillors since 2010 and isn't likely to change allegiance this year.

Whitewell and Stacksteads will be a toss-up. Just because it elected a Green councillor last year we cannot say they are likely to gain the other two seats because the Green winner was a defector from Labour who presumably had an incumbent's personal vote.

Before the Green breakthrough here this was another knife-edge marginal - the outgoing ward has one councillor from each of these three parties.



Finally **Whitworth**, in the south east corner of Rossendale, which is an amalgamation of Healey and Whitworth where "First" residents have a strong grip, but also most of Facit and Shawforth, which leans Conservative (Labour voters here seem to be voting tactically for First candidates).

First is stronger in Healey and Whitworth than the Tories are in Facit and Shawforth so the residents should be favoured to win all three seats here. But the Tories might split the ward if they have a particularly popular incumbent standing.

All of this might translate to eighteen Labour councillors, six Conservatives, three Firsts, one Green and one independent: a Labour majority of seven, which is more or less the proportions of the current, larger, council.

But because so much is so marginal, don't put any money on that projection.

Rotherham

Current council
33 Lab, 15 Con, 4 LD,
5 Ind, 2 Ind Con
Seats up All

That Labour could get re-elected, as they did in 2021, after a sex abuse scandal with over 1,100 victims that council officials and councillors knew about and turned a blind eye to, suggests that there is little chance of them losing four years further on.

The council was effectively suspended, commissioners were sent in to run the place and local elections cancelled. Yet Labour hung on when voters were finally given a chance to have their say on the scandal.

But it's actually a mischaracterisation of what happened in 2021 to paint this election as a Labour success against all odds.

Rotherham was once up there as the very safest Labour authorities. In the 1995 council elections, for example, Labour polled 82.5% borough-wide.

Where it is rare for any party to win any council with more than half the vote, Labour won Rotherham by more than that share twenty three times. This was an area in which the Conservatives - all parties in opposition to Labour - were so weak they struggled to field council candidates anywhere, let alone mount a serious challenge for power.

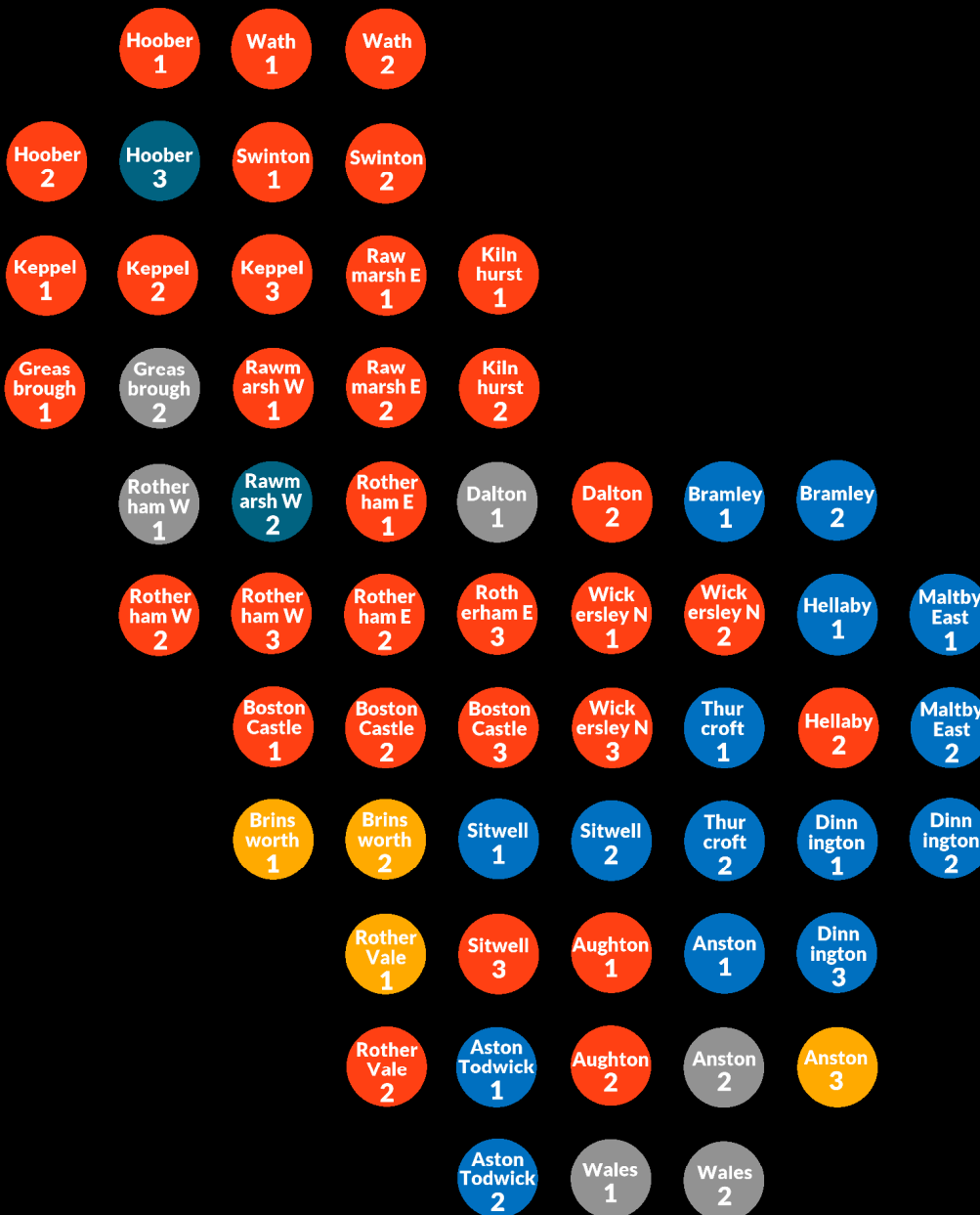
And Labour's "success" in 2021 was founded on just 34.5% of the vote. They hung on because of that latter factor: opposition parties being too weak to field full slates, as well as that bedrock of "no matter what" Labour voters (and perhaps some quarters of the electorate still believing that Labour would shield them more from a wider push-back against the wrongs committed within their community).

Labour finished just 4.3% of the Conservatives across Rotherham district. By any historical measure, that is a terrible outcome for Labour and, in some ways 2021 should be seen as the first election of a new dawn for Rotherham, not the latest election giving Labour an unbroken chain of control of this borough immediately east of Sheffield.

Rotherham district is more than just Rotherham itself. It extends for miles of countryside to the north, east and south. Here are many of the once mighty former South Yorkshire coalfields, including Orgreave: the scene of the brutal clash with the police during the miner's strike.

With coal mining a fading historical, to some romantic, aspect of Britain's industrial heritage, younger voters have moved on from the partisan fury which the miners strike scarred their parents' and grandparents' lives.

In the 2019 general election the Conservatives gained Rother Valley constituency for the first time ever - and by over 6,000. That was by much larger margins than Labour held onto Rotherham and the borough's northern constituency, Wentworth and Dearne. And most - all bar two - of the Tories' Rotherham gains in 2021 came at the Rother Valley end.



The Conservatives won twenty seats (out of 59) in 2021: the most they had ever managed before was ten and their typical haul was four or five.

As sometimes happens with parties new to a council (and, as we've seen, plenty often with well established parties!) there has been some turbulence within the new Conservative group.

Two councillors, both in the north of the district, have become independent Conservatives and a third just plain independent. The Tories lost a seat in a by-election to the Lib Dems in **Anston & Woodsetts** and one in **Aughton and Swallowsnest** to Labour shortly after the local elections. So they are down five seats, but untested in these wards for most of the past four years.

Labour also gained a seat from the "Rotherham Democratic Party" (RDP) in **Keppel**.

With such a close result four years ago there are a large number of very small majorities in Rotherham. Ten wards split their representation last time, and even in wards parties got all their candidates returned from, plenty won by tens of votes rather than hundreds.

Because the bulk of the Conservative contingent is new - indeed, the only ward that counts as reliable for them over

the long term (and this only since 2004) is **Sitwell** - it's risky to regard any of their fifteen seats as secure.

They won just two wards fairly convincingly - and neither was Sitwell. They were **Bramley and Ravenfield** and **Thurcroft and Wickersley South**.

There are some further wards where individual councillors have large-ish majorities but where lower placed Tories are fighting for their place.

For example, the top Conservative in **Anston and Woodsetts** won by 486 votes but the lowest Tory winner by just fifteen - and this is the ward in which the Lib Dems have gained a by-election seat. In **Dinnington**: top Tory winner 338 votes ahead; bottom Tory winner 42.

In usually Conservative **Sitwell**, two Tories won with more than 1,400 votes each. But their third candidate lost with 400 fewer - this appears to have been a racially aggravated result as the losing Conservative was Mohammed Suleman; the two Tory winners had clearly white English names.

This large vote spread between candidate of the same party hit Labour too. They only won one seat in **Hellaby and Maltby West** because their losing candidate polled nearly a third fewer votes than their winner. In

Keppel their two winners polled well over 1,000 votes each while the loser managed just 754. In Wales ward the top Labour winner has a majority of 397, their second councillor one of just 42.

Aside from local distaste at the Rotherham grooming scandal, the jailing of former Rotherham Labour MP Denis MacShane for expenses fraud, and perhaps at Labour having things all their own way for decades, Rotherham was also a massively Leave-voting area: 68% voting to leave, in line with Doncaster and Barnsley.

This was a huge rupture between Labour voters and Labour representatives. While this rupture has faded in intensity it remains present, manifested in polarising identity and race politics.

It was also represented in local voting intentions: Rotherham voted heavily for UKIP in the 2016 local elections - the last before the council was suspended. Eleven UKIP councillors were elected that year. The UKIP group was subject to even more turmoil than the Conservatives and eventually it split and much of it became the Rotherham Democratic Party.

The RDP won seats in three wards: **Greasbrough, Keppel** and **Rotherham West** last time but they lost Keppel to Labour in a by-election and their two

other councillors have become independents.

In other words, all five non-Labour councillors elected in the north of the district have now become independents of one shade or another. This ill-discipline bodes ill for the chances of the large non-Labour vote at the Wentworth end of the borough electing any councillors in May.

The Liberal Democrats have never been able to transfer their electoral success in next-door Sheffield across the borough boundary but the two wards they won seats in last time border the city's Darnall and Woodhouse wards: **Brinsworth** and neighbouring **Rother Vale** (which is split with Labour).

They also have that by-election gain in Anston and Woodsetts but, while their councillor here has had almost a full term to embed himself, he is very reliant on a heavily split vote to win. Even in his by-election he only managed 39%; in the all out locals 26%.

Voters were given a reminder, if they needed it, of the grooming scandal in autumn 2023 when the Police announced they were winding down their investigation having identified so many victims and sent some of the perpetrators to prison. Not enough, and not for long enough, but some.

Labour will probably put in a somewhat better performance this year than 2021 because they are doing better nationally and because the grooming scandal is slightly more distant. Because so many seats were won on a knife-edge last time a slightly larger Labour vote could mean a very much larger majority.

On the other hand, the Conservative vote is very much concentrated in the south of the district and the area's had a lot of Conservative councillors and an MP making the case for their re-election for four years.

It would not be completely shocking - unlikely but not impossible - to see the Tories embedding themselves further in the Rother Valley because the electoral shifts that led to the seismic upheaval of 2019 and 2021 wasn't aberrant: it's ongoing.

Rugby

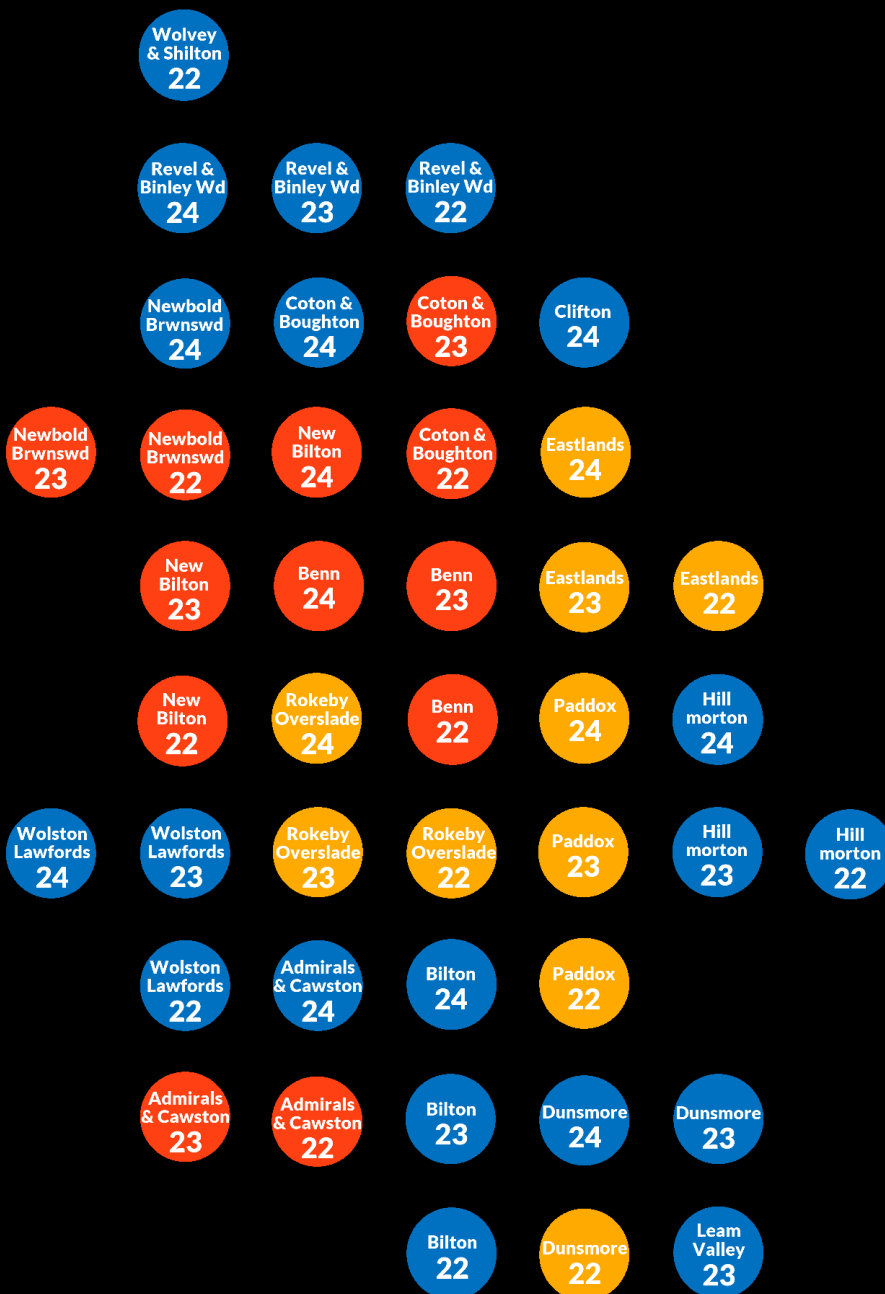
Current council

20 Con, 12 Lab, 10 LD

Seats up

9 Con, 3 LD, 2 Lab

If Rugby council covered just Rugby town, Labour would have an overall majority and the Lib Dems would probably be the principal opposition, at least right now when the Tories are so unpopular.



But this is a much larger entity: Mid Warwickshire might be a more apt name for it, stretching from the edges of Nuneaton down to not too far from Leamington and Southam. This countryside is where the majority of Conservative councillors come from.

That said, Labour did terribly the last time the seats up this year were contested in 2021. They only managed to win two of Rugby town's nine wards: the aptly-named **Benn** and adjoining **New Bilton**.

The third "inner" Rugby ward - if Rugby is large enough to have an inner city - **Newbold and Brownswood**, went Tory for the first time ever.

That will be the most obvious switch-back this year: Labour won over 51% here in 2023.

Since that poor 2021 result, Labour has been surging in Rugby. Their vote is up about seven points on 2021 while the Tories' has fallen by about ten. They have those three central wards locked down now and have been pushing into the usually-Conservative suburbs.

They now hold two of the three seats in the northern suburbs: the ward of **Coton and Broughton** and the western suburbs: **Admirals and Cawston**. Labour isn't winning these two wards by much - in an even year they would clearly be

won by the Conservatives but, as they say, one vote is enough,

With the Lib Dems holding the three southern suburban Rugby wards: **Eastlands, Paddox and Rokeby and Overslade**, the Conservatives now have only one ward in the town: **Bilton**, and that they only held by 75 votes last year.

Labour also nearly won the outlying **Hillmorton** in 2023 - they missed out by 43 votes in a ward they held a while ago but which has been Tory since 2006.

The Conservatives look almost secure in the six rural wards but three of these are single-councillor, so there are just twelve councillors representing the Mid Warwickshire sections of this borough. The Tories also lost a seat in the rural **Dunsmore** ward to the Liberal Democrats in December, with a Conservative seat in that ward up for election again this year

The Tories are still by some margin the largest party in Rugby, though they'll be at least two seats closer to Labour when **Newbold and Brownswood** returns. If they lose their last seats in those two suburban wards it'll be 17 Tories to 15 Labour.

If Labour can win Hillmorton there will be parity and, if they can snatch a seat in Bilton they will become the largest party. The Lib Dems can assist them by

gaining a second **Dunsmore** seat, but that is probably the height of their expectations.

Runnymede

Current council

19 Con, 6 Res, 5 Ind, 4 Lab, 4 LD, 2 Grn, 1 Ref

Seats up

8 Con, 2 Res, 1 LD, 1 Ref, 1 Ind

When the Conservative Party was reduced to majority control of just thirteen councils in 1996 Runnymede stayed Conservative on the mayor's casting vote.

Today, they already hold two seats fewer than they did in 1996 and the likelihood is that they will lose more this year.

Runnymede is part of the realignment of Surrey - of England indeed - since the 2016 EU referendum. It's not all that surprising that in the quarter of a century since Labour's landslide of 1997 some areas have become more Conservative and some less. What is perhaps more surprising is that Surrey, always one of the very best Tory counties, has abandoned the party so dramatically.

There are four types of district in Surrey. There are councils that are straight Conservative-Lib Dem fights, like Mole Valley and Woking.

There are those where Residents Associations and

Independents are significant players: Epsom and Ewell and Tandridge are the main examples, though they have a presence in Elmbridge, Guildford and Waverley too.

And there are the districts in which the Conservatives are still the dominant player but a diverse range of parties have been challenging their dominance. Reigate and Banstead and Runnymede are such examples.

It's this diversity of challengers that has caused the Tories' loss of power. In 1996 there were 21 Conservative councillors and 14 Labour, but only one Lib Dem and six Residents.

There are fourteen others and four Lib Dems on the council today. Labour has ten fewer: another example of places shifting allegiance over the long run.

Although part of a strongly Conservative county, constituency and district, much of Runnymede is socially mixed. Chertsey, Egham, Englefield and Addlestone all have more modest neighbourhoods with enough of a non-Tory vote for Labour to win when the Conservatives are at a very low ebb.

The seats up this year are the last from the relatively decent cycle for the Conservatives, and that is bad news for them as it means they are exposed.



Runnymede

There are Tory seats apiece up in wards that are otherwise represented by Labour: **Egham Hythe** and **Englefield Green West**. Labour only won these wards by 125 and 88 last year so they're not locked-in gains, but the non-Tory parties have started, in some wards, standing aside to give the best placed candidate the best chance to win. Both these wards were examples of this.

The Greens also hold two of the three seats in **Addlestone North** but the Conservatives no longer need to worry about this one: their last councillor has defected to Reform UK.

Addlestone North is no more secure for the Greens than the two Labour target wards are: they won by just thirty votes last year. The Reform councillor is this year's mayor of Runnymede which presumably

is boosting his profile in his election year, so if he stands again he'll have a fair shot of winning or will split the Conservative vote.

The Lib Dems have one safe ward: **Longcross, Lyne and Chertsey South** which they won in a two-way fight with 73% last year. They also gained a seat in the southern ward of **New Haw**, which they won on a swing of over 22%. The Lib Dem winner polled more than twice the votes of the ousted Tory incumbent so a second Conservative seat here is highly vulnerable.

Residents are firmly ingrained in **Egham Town** and **Thorpe** (of Thorpe Park fame), and independents hold **Englefield Green East** and, slightly less securely, **Ottershaw**.

If the electoral situation has deteriorated further for the Conservatives since 2023 - and they probably won't - then **Chertsey Riverside** and **Chertsey St Ann's** might be vulnerable to Labour.

Riverside is the somewhat closer one: the Tories clung on by 44 votes there; their majority in St Ann's is 123. **Addlestone South** was also really tight last year too: Labour missed out by eighty. And the Lib Dems could just be eyeing **Virginia Water**: they were 143 behind there after another calamitous collapse in the Tory vote: down 27 percentage points on 2019.

Conversely, if there's an uptick in Conservative support (and last year they polled just 37% across Runnymede - far worse than they managed in 1995 or 1996) they probably won't flip any seats. Instead they'll just have to content themselves with holding the eight seats they're defending and then focussing on clawing back in 2026 and 2027 the seats they've lost.

Rushmoor

Current council

23 Con, 14 Lab, 2 LD

Seats up

11 Con, 2 Lab

Rushmoor: Aldershot and Farnborough, is another of those traditionally safe Conservative areas, like Runnymede, that may be changing politically.

It's less clear cut here than in Runnymede: this is a military district with staunch Tory traditions and voted solidly Leave in 2016 (58%).

But perhaps, as much of the rest of the country is voting more on their cultural interests over their economic interests, the opposite is happening here. Traditionally, towns heavily dependent on the military lean heavily to the right because the Conservatives are usually seen as the party of the armed forces.

But Aldershot has lots of relatively low-paid, lower-rank soldiers in barracks; far more than there are relatively well-paid officer ranks.

Of course, the Conservatives have taken a hit on their leadership of the military too: their failures on forces housing, underfunding and the intrusion of woke politics into recruitment.

Let's also remember that while the military is a crucial component of these twin towns, they're by no means a majority; not even including the surrounding economy dependent upon them. Labour has always had a decent vote in Aldershot town especially, less so in Farnborough.

The Conservative majority in this small district is a fairly healthy seven seats. But if the Tories have a second year like 2023, seven won't be enough.

Last year the Conservatives won just four seats, all in Farnborough. Labour won eight and the Lib Dems one. In one year the Tory majority fell from seventeen to six.

Labour has already equalled its largest number of councillors in Rushmoor but their vote last year: an astounding 47%, is much higher than the share they managed in 1995 (33%).

Rushmoor



Part of the reason for this massively improved Labour performance is the diminution of the Lib Dems. Until they entered into coalition with the Tories nationally in 2010, the Lib Dems polled about a third of the vote, year in, year out. This vote has now halved and is showing no sign of revival, so clearly a chunk of it has migrated to Labour.

Meanwhile the Conservative vote has been in freefall: 53% in 2021, 45% in 2022; 37% in 2023. In other words, this is no longer a council where Labour's ceiling is to remove the Tory majority: they are beating them quite convincingly here.

There are two wards in which Labour holds both seats not up this year: **Cherrywood** and **Wellington**.

They won Cherrywood 68% to 32% and Wellington 57% to 36% so these are two almost certain Tory losses unless things change radically.

Labour won a further four wards for the first time last year: **Empress**, **Fernhill**, **Manor Park** and **Row Hill**. Each of these was won easily enough: Labour had a majority range of between seven and fifteen points.

It should also not be assumed that things can't get worse for the Tories. They held **St John's** by just fourteen votes and **West**

Heath by just twenty seven. The only two wards they can be fairly sure they'll hold are **Cove and Southwood** and **Knellwood**.

If the results here replicate last year the Conservatives won't just lose control: Labour will win a majority of two. That's never happened before but it's the inevitability of a party beating its opponent by ten percentage points.

St Albans

Current council

48 LD, 4 Con, 3 Grn 1 Ind

Seats up

17 LD, 2 Con

Hertfordshire, or at least western Hertfordshire is gradually becoming a Liberal Democrat stronghold.

First they gained Three Rivers, the south western corner of the county covering Chorleywood and Rickmansworth. Then, when Watford decided to opt for an elected mayor, they gained that position and won a near monopoly of seats on the council. They gained control of Dacorum: Hemel Hempstead, Tring and Berkhamsted and have overtaken Labour as the principal party of opposition in Welwyn-Hatfield. And they hold the parliamentary seat and a vice-like grip on the council of St Albans.

This fairly rapid evolution of Hertfordshire as a Lib Dem fief is odd because there is no history of strength for the party in this Home County. This is not Cornwall or Somerset, Devon on the Highlands of Scotland.

And it's not simply that this county immediately north west of London is replicating the factors that are turning Surrey Lib Dem either. Hertfordshire does not have the same demographics as Surrey - it's nowhere near as affluent, and at least as large a chunk of the growing Lib Dem vote is coming in areas where Labour used to be the go-to party as it is draining from the Conservatives.

The big Lib Dem advance in St Albans came in the all-out elections in 2022. Until then there had been a long-term scuffle between the Tories and Lib Dems for an overall majority. The Lib Dems held most seats in the city of St Albans; the Conservatives were strong in the rural surrounds and Harpenden.

The Conservatives lost their majority in 2019; in 2021 the Lib Dems won their own of four seats. Labour has gradually been ground to extinction: they held ten seats as recently as 2004 and were down to three (London Colney ward) by 2021.

Then there were all-out elections. The Lib Dem majority leapt from four seats to forty four. Labour was eradicated, the Tories held just four councillors and the Greens took two.

2023 was essentially a rerun of 2022 with the Greens gaining a couple of extra seats but nothing else changing.

Nothing the Conservatives could do can change the overall outcome of the council: even if they won every single seat the Lib Dems would keep power. But the Tories won't come anywhere near such an outcome.

The best the Conservatives can do here this time around is to try to regain a bigger stake in Harpenden. They lost **Harpden West** by 67 votes last year. The other two Lib Dem Harpenden seats are considerably safer.

There are other potential targets for the Conservatives. They were only 164 votes short in **St Stephen**: an outlying ward in the south west of the district. They were about ten percentage points - 253 votes - behind in **Sandridge and Wheathampstead**: the rural east of the district.

Although they lost **London Colney** in 2022, Labour is still strong here. They missed out by 26 votes last year: this despite a Lib Dem incumbent standing

But it's the Greens who have the easiest path to gaining seats. They don't have any safe wards but the one they have won most often is **St Peter's** - the west end of the city, which split two Lib Dems and one Green in 2022. The Green seat came up in 2023 and they held it by 285. Now they can go after the first of the Lib Dems there.

The seat the Greens gained last year was in **Clarence**, which adjoins **St Peter's** - St Albans Central. They won here far more comfortably: by 448, though no Lib Dem incumbent contested the ward.

There has to be a swing back from the Liberal Democrats: there always is whenever a party wins a landslide (though Cheltenham and Eastleigh Lib Dems would beg to differ). The swing back in St Albans began last year, almost imperceptibly, but there.

Voters tend not to like investing complete power in one side - it leads to an absence of scrutiny and no one to espouse a contrary view.

That's not to suggest that the Lib Dems are in any way vulnerable in St Albans for the medium term future.

Salford

Mayor of Salford
Paul Dennett (Lab)

Current council
50 Lab, 8 Con, 2 Ind
Seats up
17 Lab, 3 Con

The boundary between Manchester and the surrounding towns and suburbs is entirely porous. Old Trafford stadium, for example, is not in the city - as the name suggests it's in Trafford. The centre and north of Manchester is renowned, in part, for its canals - and they merge seamlessly into the city of Salford at Ordsall and Broughton.

After Manchester itself, and perhaps Tameside, Salford is the strongest Labour district in Greater Manchester. The party has never lost its majority - twelve seats was the lowest its ever been, and from the regenerated docklands out past Ordsall, Eccles, Swinton and Walkley, it is bloc after bloc of safe Labour wards - wards that have never, or almost never voted for anyone other.

There are just two secure Conservative wards: **Boothstown and Ellenbrook**, and **Worsley and Westwood Park** in the city's narrow semi-rural belt before you reach Astley and Leigh in Wigan district.

Then there is the inner ward of **Kersal and Broughton Park** with its large Jewish community which spans the boundary with Bury district. The Tories have been able to win here since anti-Semitism became an issue within the Labour Party. It briefly had a Conservative, Lib Dem and Independent councillor, but now two Tories and an Indie: anyone but Labour it seems.

The Conservatives can sometimes (though it's been a while) win Walkden South, and an even longer time **Eccles and Swinton Park** - but only in the depths of an exceptionally unpopular Labour government might these wards come into play.

The Lib Dems are trying to establish a bridgehead in the regenerated docklands where the BBC's so called Media City has been constructed and where plenty of its affluent employees have moved. They have seats in **Ordsall** and **Quays** but won neither last year. **Quays** is the closer: 123 votes separated them from Labour last year; in **Ordsall** it was 236.

Everything else is very safely Labour, with the party winning eleven of the remaining thirteen wards with over 60% of the vote - two with over 70%.

This is a district with a Labour vote distributed so evenly, and deeply, that while their vote city-wide can fluctuate quite a

lot (it fell as low as 35% during the Brown premiership) this rarely translates into a wholesale loss of seats - at least nowhere near enough for their majority to be threatened. Labour is well organised here.

Sandwell

Current council
59 Lab, 8 Con, 5 Ind
Seats up
17 Lab, 4 Con, 3 Ind

Sandwell is a lot like Rotherham in the sense that it has, for years been the Labour citadel in the West Midlands, with years when the party has won every single seat up for election. Also like Rotherham, its Labour administration has not been all that impressive on occasion: commissioners have been running sections of the council for the past few years.

Given its massive Labour majority, two of the more surprising 2019 general election results came in West Bromwich East (vacated by disgraced Labour Deputy Leader Tom Watson) and West Bromwich West (the former constituency of Betty Boothroyd), both gained quite easily by the Conservatives. Given Halesowen and Rowley Regis was already Tory-held, Labour was left with just over a quarter of the borough: John Spellar's Warley.

Then the question was whether the Tories could break Labour's hold on Sandwell in the constituencies they now held.

They had to wait until 2021 given the 2020 elections were scrapped due to Covid - perhaps some of the Tories' momentum had abated by then. But they still managed to gain seats in seven wards - enough, if they gradually gained full control of those wards, for a group of 21 councillors.

As you can see from the dashboard above, things didn't work out that way. Today there are just eight Conservative councillors in Sandwell. So what happened?

Most obviously, the 2022 and 2023 rounds of elections were far less successful for the Tories.

The Tories won just three seats in 2022 and two last year.

The two "loyal" Conservative wards are **Charlmont with Grove Vale** - the best Tory ward in the borough over the years, and **Princes End**: the northern parts of Tipton. They hold single seats in **Friar Park, Great Barr with Yew Tree**, and **Tividale**.

The same issues discussed in the Rotherham profile: of a new Conservative group struggling with discipline and cohesion, have occurred here. Added to which has been some horrific infighting.

First, Conservative group leader David Fisher resigned from the role after contentious social media posts were disclosed. Then his successor, Laured Kalari was forced out in 2022 for exactly the same problem: dodgy social media posts. Fisher was reinstated to both the group and its leadership but Kalari remains outside the group.

Another Tory councillor in **Old Warley** has resigned the whip, and three defected to Labour months after being elected.

All of this nonsense gives Labour a pass over their less than stellar management of Sandwell.

Labour has also had its fallings out. One is independent after allegedly filming a lewd act on a council phone. Lovely. There are two other ex-Labour independents.

Because 2021 was their breakthrough year, the Conservatives have more exposure this year, even with their diminished group.

There's no such thing as a safe Tory seat in Sandwell but **Charlemont with Grove Vale** looks reasonably okay for them: they were nine percentage points ahead last year. Group leader Fisher is the councillor up this year.

They also won **Prince's End** last year by 72. The councillor up for re-election here is one of the Tory defectors to Labour: Archer Williams.

Old Warley is competitive too: Labour only won here by 131 votes last year, though part of the reason it was so close was that the councillor elected as Labour here in 2019 contested the ward as a Lib Dem (and lost badly - this is not a liberal borough). This year it's a defector from the Tories up for election as an independent.

Things then get a lot tougher for the Tories: the seats they hold are in wards that have elected two Labour councillors more recently, and quite comfortably too.

The Tories gained **Friar Park** on a 32% swing in 2021: 52% to 39%. But in 2023 the ward voted 55% Labour to 33% Tory.

In **Great Barr with Yew Tree** the Tories won 47% to 37% in 2021 but it went Labour 51% to 33%.

Great Bridge was the closest Conservative gain in 2021: they won by just eighteen votes. Labour hasn't pulled as clear in this ward as the others just gone through: they won by only 125 votes last year, so perhaps the Tories can hang on here. The Tories won **Rowley** by nine points in 2021; Labour won it by sixteen in 2023. The seat up this

year is Laured Kalari's; the former Tory leader now independent.

There are not really any Conservative targets in Sandwell this year: those may come in 2025 and 2026 but this year they will be doing well to hold the seats they gained in 2021,

The council comes out of special measures just before the local elections. Maybe the Tory group should have been put in the same straightjacket these past four years.

Whatever happens this year in this third of seats Labour will retain a big majority.

Sefton

Current council

51 Lab, 9 LD, 5 Con, 1 Ind

Seats up

16 Lab, 3 Con, 2 LD, 1LD

Peculiarly-shaped Sefton was drawn to be the one Conservative district on the east bank of the Mersey. It started out that way but, after nine elections, the Tories lost it - and they've never got it back.

Instead Sefton evolved into a district with three almost equal sections. In the south, virtually indistinguishable from Liverpool on the ground, was Bootle: incredibly deprived. In the middle were the affluent areas

around Aintree race course and the seaside resorts of Crosby, Formby while, in the north, the Lib Dems mopped up nearly all the seats in Southport.

Between 1986 and 2012 no party had a majority on Sefton council; nowhere close. In 2000, to take one random year, there were 25 Lib Dems, 22 Labour and 19 Conservatives.

That status quo cracked the moment Labour lost the 2010 general election. Labour went from 23 councillors to 28 in 2011, 36 in 2012 and 40 in 2014. They haven't been below 40 since.

Conservatives and Lib Dems are now in single figures and, given the electoral history of Merseyside, it probably won't be long before this district has a near monopoly for Labour - indeed, not a single Tory was elected last year: the first time that has happened. Two more rounds like that and Sefton will join Liverpool and Knowsley as Conservative-free zones.

Nowadays, the only three-way battles are in Southport, as Labour gradually replaces the Lib Dems as the party for non-Tories to line up behind.

These are the only elections of interest, unless you are also fascinated by how high Labour can poll at the other end of the district in Bootle. 75% in **Litherland**, 85% in **Netherton**

and **Orrell**, 82% in **St Oswald**, 81% in **Derby** and **Ford** last time. It's not uncommon for the other parties to not even bother contesting the Bootle wards.

At the more competitive end of the district, the Lib Dems won four seats last year and Labour three, including their first ever win in **Ainsdale** (Lab 36%, LD 35%, Con 25%), Only **Meols**, the ward that juts into sea across from the Fylde peninsula, looks remotely safe for the Lib Dems now.

They were just 75 ahead of Labour in **Birkdale**, and involved in what are still two-way skirmishes with the Tories in the other two: **Cambridge** and **Dukes**.

Harington, traditionally the best Conservative ward in Sefton; midway between Southport and Formby, went Labour as an ex-Tory independent incumbent split the Conservative vote, letting Labour in with just 35%. Labour holds two of the three seats there but, if the Tories can stop falling out, they still have a decent chance here, and the two Lib Dem wards in Southport.

But be in no doubt: **Harington** is trending exactly the same way as, say, **Blundellsands**: Tory at every election until 2012, now with a 69% Labour vote share; or the five wards that began as Labour, had a long Lib Dem interregnum and are now solidly

Labour too. There is something of an independent-residents association presence but it mainly comprises councillors who resign from Labour and then go on to lose to their old party at the first opportunity.

For some reason these independents tend to crop up in the wards around Maghull or the centre of the district. This year it's ex Labour Park councillor Andrew Wilson heading for the chopping block.

The fast and massive swing to Labour in what might be called Greater Liverpool has been one of the big regional psephological events since the 1980s. It has now enveloped Sefton. Visceral socialism is part of the identity for a large portion of the residents of that great city, and it's increasingly flowing up the Mersey.

Sheffield

Current council
31 Lab, 29 LD, 14 Grn,
8 Cmty, 1 Con, 1 Ind
Seats up
10 Lab, 9 LD, 6 Grn,
2 Cmty, 1 Con

No matter what Labour's national poll lead stands at, questions are still going to be asked as to how it is that major cities like Sheffield and Hull are not comfortably held by the

party after fourteen years of Conservative government.

In large part it is because councils where the Conservatives ceased to exist, or almost do, offer voters a different choice than those in which it makes sense to protest by lining up behind the principal party of opposition.

In Sheffield there are two strong opposition parties: Liberal Democrats for the moderates and Greens for the radicals.

There have also been huge local gaffes by Labour that cost them their majority in 2021, notably the council's disastrous plan to fell 18,000 of the city's trees. We've already seen how trees are powerful drivers of votes in Plymouth. But in Sheffield it was Labour who were felled by the trees, not the Conservatives.

It was the surge in Green Party votes, and seats, that removed Labour's majority. The Guardian provides a blow-by-blow account of the saga in *Chainsaws, Disguises and Toxic Tea*.

In 2018 Labour held a majority of 22 seats - it looked as though the days of neck-and-neck struggle with the Lib Dems for control were behind them. Labour finished 16 points ahead of the Lib Dems city-wide. In 2019 four Green gains trimmed the Labour majority to fourteen. Because of the pandemic it was not until 2021 that voters got

their next say. This is where things went badly wrong for Labour.

Although they actually recovered slightly in terms of city-wide vote share (from 32% to 37% - still a dreadful share for this party in this city) they were hit by a form of tactical voting in the wards most affected by the scandal.

Labour lost eight seats: four to the Greens, three to the Lib Dems and one - **Stocksbridge and Upper Don** - to the Tories, who last won a seat in the city since 2004. This one probably had less to do with trees and more to do with the post-Brexit realignment of heavily Leave-voting areas away from Labour.

Labour's vote share continued to improve in 2022 and 2023 but they ceded a seat, net, in each of those elections. In fact the 2023 loss was not at the elections but a few weeks before when their **Park and Arbourthorne** councillor resigned to serve as an independent, seemingly for Corbynite reasons of disillusion with the direction of the party. But Labour remained - by far the largest party in Sheffield: ten seats bigger than the Lib Dems after 2023.

But then the party made another unforced error. In October seven of its councillors voted against the Local Plan -



Sheffield

the document that determines planning policy for the city and were suspended from the Labour Group. This group included the former council leader Terry Fox, ousted in May.

Rather than seek to regain the Labour whip, these seven plus another formed the Sheffield Community Independents (SCI). All of a sudden Labour was just one seat ahead of the Lib Dems and miles from the 43 needed for an overall majority. They have never had as few as 31 councillors in Sheffield, even when the Lib Dems had a majority here.

This may, though, be rock bottom for Labour. The electoral battleground in 2024 somewhat favours them.

First, the independent seat in **Park and Arbourthorne**, just south of the city centre, is up for election.

This is not typically one of Labour's absolute safest wards even though they nearly always win it. They polled just under half the votes here in 2023. The independent, Sophie Wilson made play of her priority of wanting to organise the community better as a free agent when she quit so we'll see if she has been able to organise this 13,000 elector ward sufficiently to win.

The Conservatives have failed to build on their 2021 gain of

Stocksbridge and Upper Don and now that solitary Tory councillor, Lewis Chinchin, must face the electorate again.

One of the SCI councillors represents a different seat in this ward and chaos could ensue if they contest the ward. Will they take more votes from Labour, given the SCI originate from that party; or will they draw more anti-Labour voters to their cause? One outcome helps the Tories hold on, the other does not. Labour was over 900 votes ahead in Stocksbridge last year so the Tories may well need some form of intervention to hold on.

The Liberal Democrats have two offensive targets: **Mosborough**, the most south-easterly ward in the city; and **Crookes and Crosspool**, on the edge of the Peak District National Park. But they have to play defence in **East Ecclesfield** in the north east of Sheffield, where Labour hold one of the seats and were only 108 votes behind last year.

The Lib Dems hold all the seats in every other ward they will be defending. **Graves Park** is the most vulnerable of these all-LD wards.

The Greens are also on the defensive in two wards, both of which Labour is gradually shunting them out of. The first is **Nether Edge and Sharrow**; the other **Walkley**. Both of these lie in the Sheffield Central division

which is the Green fiefdom with it's huge student population. On its new boundaries Sheffield Central voted 44.6% Labour to 43.3% Green last year.

Labour holds both other seats in both wards. Nether Edge was the slightly closer last year. Unless they can bring another ward into play - and they aren't especially close to Labour anywhere else, it looks like twelve seats may be the Greens; plateau for the time being.

Then there are those eight Sheffield Community Independents. Just two of them are up this year: one in **Birley** (where they represent two of the seats) and the other in the council estate ward of **Southey**, which is actually in the Northy. Both of these are usually very safely Labour.

We also do not know what the intent of the SCI is. Is it merely a vessel for these eight to simply serve out their time on the council and then disappear, or do they want to take the fight to Labour?

Even if they're up for that fight, do they have the organisation and support to take on a major party in huge wards like Sheffield's? It is soul destroying and expensive to attempt to win a ward of 13,000 voters used to voting for a political party single-handedly. You need help. All in all, Labour is likely to improve its position from this

all-time low, possibly by as many as six seats. That will still leave them far from regaining control, but such is the way with councils only offering up a third of councillors each year - it takes time to rebuild.

Solihull

Current council

29 Con, 12 Grn, 6 LD, 4 Ind

Seats up

10 Con, 5 Grn, 2 Ind

There are three Metropolitan Districts controlled by the Conservatives - all in the West Midlands. One is Dudley, one is Walsall, and one is Solihull.

Of these, Solihull is what you might call the "naturally" Tory council. And the only one without a single Labour councillor.

Aside from the huge **Chelmsley Wood** council estate in the north this is a universally affluent, semi-rural district spanning the gap between Birmingham and Coventry.

Even when the Lib Dems held Solihull constituency during the new Labour years they didn't come close to a majority on its council: this borough has only ever been Conservative or under no overall control.

Today, the Lib Dems are massively diminished. It is the Greens that are now the main

opposition in Solihull, though they seem to have peaked.

The Lib Dems should gain three seats this year: one each in the Solihull town wards of **Elmdon**, **Lyndon** and **Olton**.

The Greens have the chance to recapture a seat that's gone independent in Chelmsley Wood.

The Conservatives' main chance is against one of their defectors

in **St Alphege** ward. In 2021 as a Tory she won with a majority of nearly 3,000: 69% to the Lib Dems' 10%, so even if she splits the Conservative vote a fair bit it's hard to see that one not reverting.

Everything else should stay as is and the Tories will retain control of Solihull with a comfortable enough majority.

South Tyneside

Current council

38 Lab, 9 Grn, 6 Ind, 1 Con

Seats up

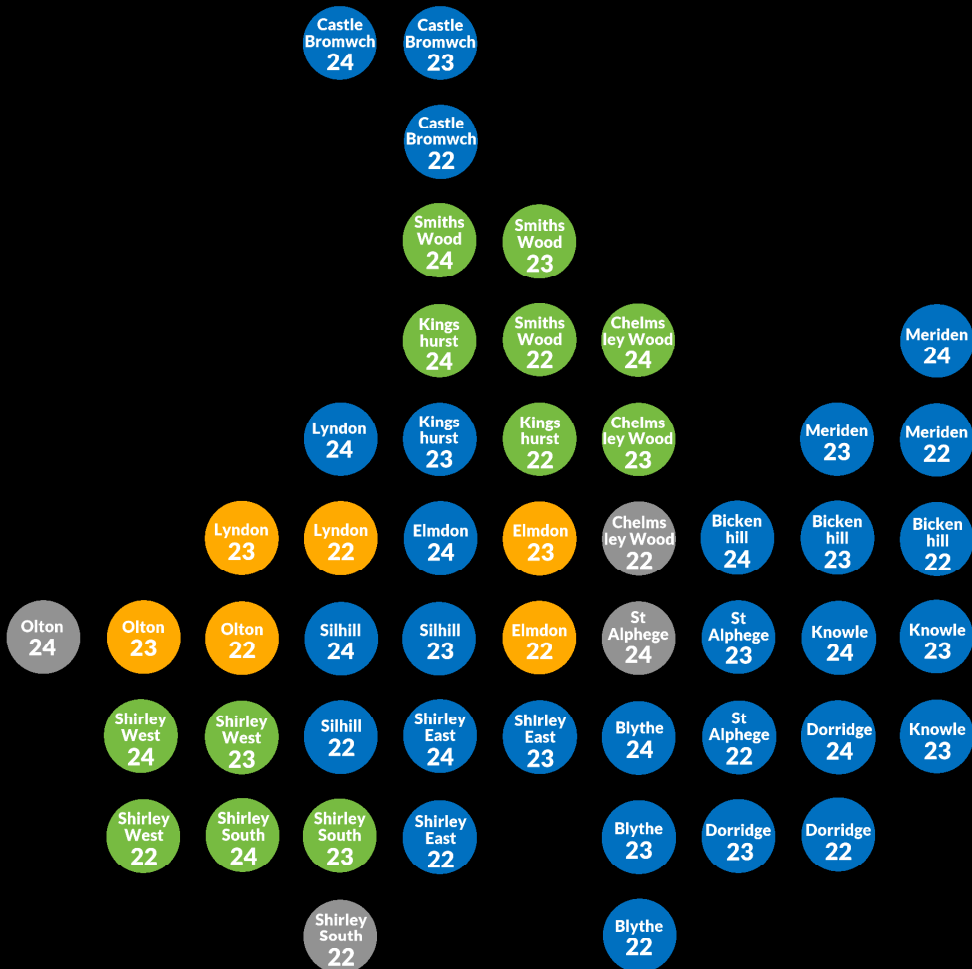
13 Lab, 2 Grn, 1 Ind, 1 Con

To find a time when there were sixteen non-Labour councillors on South Tyneside council - Jarrow and South Shields - you have to go back to the depths of the last Labour government in 2008; and before that all the way to 1980.

This has been one of Labour's most secure councils for decades: an almost Tory-free zone and probably about to lose its last Conservative councillor.

There has been no serious party competition in South Tyneside pretty much ever. The source of opposition to Labour has tended to come from independents and, in its earliest days, from a "Progressive" party that turned non-Labour votes into a hefty number of seats - enough to cost Labour control from 1976 to 1979.

Today, the principal challenge to Labour comes from the Green Party which has managed to skirmish for nine seats, and should be good for at least three



Solihull

more. There are also a handful of independents - mainly in Jarrow town.

On the basis of last year's elections, the Greens can reasonably expect to make two gains in wards they already hold councillors in, and the independents should be able to add two councillors more to their number.

The first Green gain will be in the comparatively affluent **Cleadon and East Boldon** ward: the last Conservative seat on the district. This ward has had Lib Dem, Labour and independent councillors, as well as Tories and Greens and it is quite volatile in its political favours.

The Tories were 35 percentage points ahead of the Greens here in 2021 but, by 2023, it was a three horse race that the Greens won: 40% to 31% for Labour and 27% for the Tories.

The Greens won **Biddick and All Saints** for the first time last year on a 23.5% swing: it wasn't close, so they should be able to gain seat no.2 this year.

There aren't any obvious further Green targets this year. In fact it was independents who put more wards into play in 2023.

One they won last year, but may struggle to this is **Bede** - Jarrow East. Labour holds both other

seats and the independent elected last year was an incumbent who won in 2019 and 2015, suggesting a personal vote that can't be transferred.

Primrose - Jarrow West - has been won by independents four elections in a row so they should be on stronger ground there.

Independents missed out on gaining **Cleadon Park** by just six votes last year, and they weren't out of the running in **Boldon Colliery, Fellgate and Hedworth, Hebburn South and Westoe**. They won't gain all of these this year - possibly not any of them - but they are putting wards into play and making Labour finally work for its control of South Tyneside.

Southampton

Current council
37 Lab, 9 Con, 3 LD, 1 Grn, 1 Ind
Seats up
14 Lab, 2 Con, 1 LD

What a difference a boundary change makes - especially when one of the two main players is tanking in popularity.

In 2021, grinding out seat by seat gains across Southampton in the third of seats up each year, the Conservatives took control of the city council by two seats. Labour wrestled control back in 2022. But then all out elections in 2023

following a ward boundary review destroyed Conservative chances in the city for at least two years and probably longer.

Labour leapt from 26 to 38 seats; Conservatives collapsed from 21 to just 9. Three Lib Dems and a Green also won. Things were made worse for the Tories by the council growing by three seats - the new ward, **Banister and Polygon**, is pretty safely Labour.

Can the Conservatives begin the repair work this year, or will it have to wait until they're in opposition? They have quite a few potential targets.

First up there is **Millbrook** ward which elected two Tories and one Labour last year. It's the Labour councillor up for election first and her majority is just 23.

Peartree on the east bank of the river Itchen, also split representation last year and, again, it is a Labour councillor who must defend his seat first. He won by 34 votes.

Bitterne Park ward, where the lowest-placed Labour councillor has left the group has a Labour majority of only 74 and this is normally reliably Conservative.

Then there is **Coxford**: the north-western suburbs of Southampton. Labour won all three seats here, but only just. As with **Bitterne Park**, the

councillor up for re-election won by just 74 votes.

There are three other wards vulnerable to the slightest Conservative uptick. **Thornhill**, the renamed Bitterne ward in the east of the city, was one of the historically Labour wards the Conservatives had been making steady advances in. Labour got all three seats back last year but the majority of their most vulnerable councillor is 143.

Woolston, at the mouth of the Itchen, tells a similar story: historically strongly Labour but one of the wards that gave the Tories their brief council majority in 2021. The Labour majority here is 155.

At the top end of the Tories' range for gains is **Shirley**, where Labour has a more comfortable majority of 313.

Holding what they have - they're just defending two seats this year - and making up to five or six gains from Labour would be an exceptional performance for the Conservatives.

Labour suddenly also needs to defend itself from the Green Party in **Portswood** ward. This ward is the opposite of **Thornton** and **Woolston**: it has not historically been Labour: rather starting off Conservative and spending a while Lib Dem.

A Green topped the poll here last year, ahead of two Labour

councillors. There is quite a gap between the lowest Labour and Green runner-up: 380 votes - in fact the Green share fell there last year; it's just Labour's fell by more, and the Conservatives increased by eight points.

The Lib Dems are fairly secure in their sole ward: **Bassett**, but this one is historically Tory and they'd love it back. They were 359 adrift last time, so it's not entirely safe for the Lib Dems. But this is a far cry from the days - not so long ago - when they were the largest party on Southampton with as many as nineteen councillors.

The boundary review locked Labour into power for at least two years beyond 2023, but their landslide was founded on some very narrow wins in several marginal wards and it would be surprising if they held what they won last year.

Six affiliations are represented on Southend council and this is a vibrant, perhaps chaotic battleground council.

It's never been anything other than Conservative controlled or under no overall control and, despite steady Labour gains in recent years, that's not going to change in the immediate future. Most of Labour's progress has been at the expense of the Liberal Democrats: there have been some gains from the Tories but mainly it's been one party of opposition replacing another.

That is not to say the Tories are doing well, even though they're

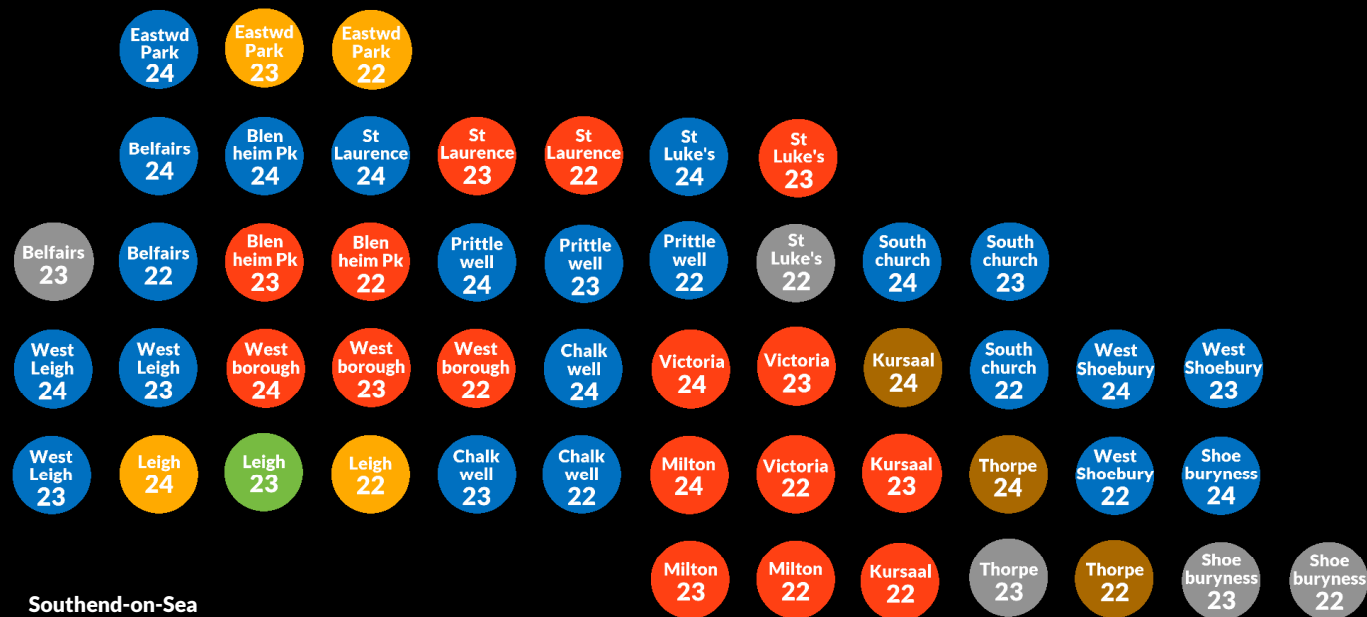
only four seats from getting their majority back. The 31.8% they polled last year was worse than they managed in the run up to the Blair landslide: the benchmark for dire Conservative performances. But they've been salvaged somewhat by the decline of the Lib Dems and the growth of other parties, splitting the opposition vote.

Labour is strongest in the centre of Southend, which is unfortunate for them as their wards get split between the two Southend constituencies. If they were united in one seat they would now have a serious chance of winning their first ever MP for the town.

Southend-on-Sea

Current council
22 Con, 16 Lab, 5 Ind,
4 LD, 3 First, 1 Grn

Seats up
11 Con, 3 Lab, 2 First, 1 LD



There are three wards which have two Labour councillors and a Tory, who is up for re-election this year. They are **Blenheim Park**, **St Laurence** and **St Luke**.

The latter look like locked-in Labour gains, both being in that central core of strength for the party. **Blenheim Park** is more complicated. They only won with 34% last year after a former Conservative independent split their vote. The year before, in a more straight-forward field of candidates Labour won 44/40. Labour start as favourites, but not massive favourites.

The Tories are in the same situation in **Eastwood Park** ward, except it's the Lib Dems who hold the other two seats here. The result last year was a blow-out: 68% Lib Dem, 24% Conservative, so we can reasonably expect this Tory seat to fold.

The Lib Dems need **Eastwood Park** because, last year, the Greens gained a seat in **Leigh**: a ward that has been Lib Dem since it was created. And Leigh on Sea was their last redoubt.

The Greens didn't win massively: by just over 200, but their surge was massive: they climbed by thirty percentage points. If that sort of gain repeats the Lib Dems cannot defend this ward.

Labour will also want returned their seat in **Kursaal** where a defector to Community First is up for election. Labour won with 55% to the Tories' 21% last year, so it'll be an uphill slog for First to hold that seat, should they even try.

Another First seat is up in **Thorpe** ward and, again, it's a defector, though one from independent. The east end of Southend is its own electoral microcosm: essentially a straight battle between independents (whatever they're calling themselves) and the Tories. This is less day-tripper territory, away from the promenade and the rigid, tightly packed terraces of the rest of Southend.

Thorpe has elected independents since 2008 and they seem to be Conservative-leaning indies given the Tories didn't stand against them last year.

Shoeburyness has two independent councillors and one Conservative - who's up for re-election. I'm unconvinced the independents will take this seat: the ward is very closely fought and last year's independent incumbent won by only 83.

An independent also won the normally Conservative ward of **Belfairs** on the far west side of Southend last year. We'll see if that was a one-off at close of nominations - if it wasn't the win last year was by enough to

worry the Tories. Independents have won here before, so it could be just a local challenger wanting to serve his community. The other parties are nowhere in this ward.

One last note, a local party for Southend: Confelicity, fielded candidates in every ward last year. Their highest vote was 127, but out of small beginnings. Another example of people wanting an alternative to party politics in grassroots issues.

The Conservatives could be reduced to parity with Labour - possibly even one or two seats smaller - this year, which has never happened before (they have been behind the Lib Dems before here, but not Labour). The council will stay hung but it will be hard for the Conservative minority administration to retain power on those sort of numbers.

Stevenage

Current council

24 Lab, 9 Con, 6 LD

Seats up

All - boundary changes

There are only very minor boundary changes to wards following this New Town's boundary review.

Labour will easily retain control of Stevenage: this one hasn't gone the way of Basildon or

Harlow in swinging to the Conservatives (that much).

The party has a nine seat majority now and this should increase to fifteen as the Conservatives seem destined to lose their sole seats in **Bandley Hill**, **Old Town** and **Roebuck**.

That leaves them with just two wards in which they hold all the seats at the moment - at either end of the town: **Woodfield** in the north, and **Longmeadow** in the south.

Of these, they clung onto **Longmeadow** by just fourteen votes last year (though it hardly swung at all). It's possible this ward could split given the vagaries of all-out elections where voters are used to just casting a single vote instead of three.

The Lib Dems hold two wards: **Manor** very safely (71% vote share last year) and **Chells** more marginally, though the ward takes some streets from Manor which should help them.

The Tories aren't entirely out of the picture in most wards: they poll decently almost everywhere: it's just their vote is too evenly spread to cause Labour much of a problem. They really need to persuade some of their voters in the safer Labour wards like **Shepall** or **St Nicholas** to move to **Old Town** or **Bandley Hill**.

Stevenage will go something like Labour 26, Conservative 6, Lib Dem 6, but if Longmeadow splits the Tories will find themselves the third party on this council.

Stockport

Current council

29 LD, 24 Lab, 3 Grn,
3 Cmty, 3 Res, 1 Ind

Seats up

9 LD 9 Lab 1 Grn 1 Cmty 1 Res

Until 2021 local elections in Stockport were rather stuck in a rut. No party held a majority so Labour and the Lib Dems battled it out to be the largest group because in Stockport, usually the larger party was allowed to govern in the minority.

There were usually six or so Conservatives from the wealthy suburb of Bramhall and there were three quaintly-named independent ratepayers in Cheadle's **Heald Green** neighbourhood.

In 2021, the Greens broke through, turning the formerly safe Labour **Reddish South** distinctly greenish.

Then, last year, there were all out elections following boundary changes, and things got a little more complicated.



The Greens took all three seats in **Reddish South** but, in addition, three community independents won **Edgeley**. Again, this was formerly a fairly safe Labour ward. Meanwhile the Lib Dems booted the Tories off the council, winning all six

Bramhall seats and taking the hold-out Tory seat in Hazel Grove ward.

This was pretty bad news for Labour, who had been pushing hard to break into the suburban wards fringing Stockport town.

They succeeded to an extent, winning a seat in **Offerton** and two in **Bredbury and Woodley** and **Cheadle East**.

Their problems were twofold: first the Lib Dem gains from the Tories more than offset the Labour gains from the Lib Dems; and second they had also lost those two wards to Greens and independents. Stockport stayed hung but there's now a five seat gap between the Lib Dems and Labour - worse, the LDs are now just four seats from a majority.

Labour in this district, at least, wants something of a Conservative revival. They have no exposure to the Tories: every Conservative seat gained comes off the Liberal Democrats.

It's hard to conceive that Stockport was a Conservative majority district once; that all three constituencies here were Tory held. But demographic change pushed the party out of Stockport town and Lib Dem organisation in the suburbs created a threat of wipe out.

Last year the Conservative vote collapsed. They polled just 16% district-wide. Even in the run-up to 1997 their lowest was 21.5%. Nonetheless, because their vote is now so concentrated in two or three wards, we cannot yet determine whether the Tories are dormant or fully extinct.

The first up for re-election Lib Dems in **Bramhall North** and **Bramhall South** have majorities of 94 and 163. These are leads the Tories could overturn with a bit more effective organisation even if the political tide hasn't turned much.

The Conservatives also did well - surprisingly well, perhaps, in the next-door ward of **Norbury and Woodsmoor** - the old Stepping Hill. They had remained just about competitive in **Stepping Hill** but it was becoming a Labour-Lib Dem battleground. The lowest Lib

Dem councillor there eked out an 86 majority.

There are no other Tory targets: nor do they deserve them if they can't win more than 16% of the vote.

The Green seats in **Reddish South** and the Ratepayers in **Heald Green** look safe enough, but Edgeley was somewhat close. The independents should start as clear favourites but their third placed councillor was only 278 of Labour.

That leaves the main battleground between Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Given how the wards split last year, you might think the Lib Dems were on the defence in at least three wards. But in all three split wards Labour ended up in the seat facing re-election this year. So there are no Lib Dem seats vulnerable,

In **Offerton**, Labour is defending a majority of just ten. In **Cheadle East and Cheadle Hulme North**, their majority is 80. And in **Bredbury and Woodley** it's 89.

Plus there is **Manor** ward, where Labour won all three seats last year but where their lowest placed councillor was just 49 votes ahead.

If the Lib Dems can flip these four seats without losing

anything back to the Conservatives, they get an overall majority, for the first time since 2011. This really isn't that big an ask given that they don't need to defend anything from Labour.

To be fair to Labour, Stockport is a very tough ask for them. They are a distant third in two of the three constituencies and its very much harder to break into, then hold wards where the Lib Dems are embedded and well organised. But to be so close and for things to probably slip away somewhat is going to be infuriating for them.

Stroud

Current council

18 Con, 14 Grn, 4 Lab, 4 Left, 4 Cmty, 3 LD, 2 Ind, 1 Ind Con, 1 vac
Seats up: All

Welcome to nihilistic bohemian chaos: the district of Stroud. If the council the voters elected in 2021 had held there would be twenty Conservatives, fifteen Labour, thirteen Greens and 3 Lib Dems.

Instead, Labour in particular has imploded, retaining barely one quarter of the councillors that were elected under their banner. Four have gone to the left, four to Community Independent, two are straight-

forward independents and one went over to the Greens.

Even though the Conservatives are the largest party, there are more than enough supposedly "progressive" councillors to outvote them and install a minority Green administration.

Everyone is pretty far from a majority (26 seats) . Of the fifteen wards that can split (twelve cannot because they are single-member) just four are not currently, either at the behest of voters or turncoat councillors themselves.

If the Conservatives won every seat in wards where they hold at least one, they'd have 29.

If only things in Stroud were so straightforward. Of course that is not going to happen!

There are only four safe wards in Stroud: Conservative-held **Hardwicke** and **Severn** and two Green single-councillor wards: **Randwick, Whiteshill and Ruscombe**; and **Thrupp**.

It may seem a cop-out but there really is little point in looking at this ward-by ward. It might be more helpful to bundle wards into sets of whichever parties are the main challengers and which are all-out bun fights. But even this will be somewhat unreliable because we don't know what the splitters from Labour intend to do.

The Community Independent group broke from Labour when the council leader, Doina Cornell, was barred by party bosses from seeking the parliamentary nomination for Stroud - a vote she appeared likely to win. Cllr Cornell posed the question as to why she was regarded fit to lead a local authority (wielding far more influence than she would have as a backbench MP), but not serve her area in parliament.

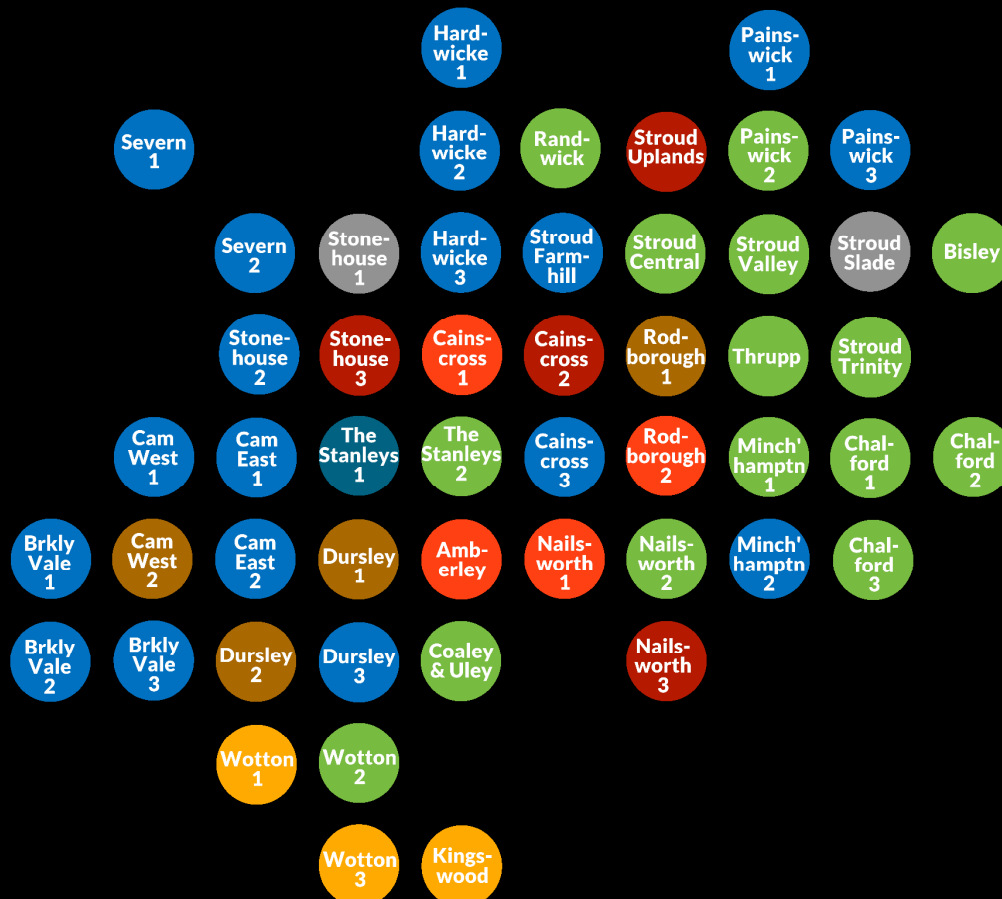
Just weeks later, a further five councillors quit in protest at HQ interference in that parliamentary selection (one of the five has now left that group too: he's one of the two unaffiliated independents).

So let's have a go at unscrambling this omelette.

The Tory-Labour battleground comprises six wards: **Amberley and Woodchester, Berkeley Vale, Cainscross, Cam East, Cam West, and Stroud Farmhill and Paganhill.**

There are four Conservative-Green fights: **Bisley, Coaley and Uley, Minchinhampton and Painswick and Upton.**

Labour faces the Greens directly in seven wards, mostly in Stroud town itself: **Nails-worth, Stroud Central, Stroud Slade, Stroud Trinity, Stroud Uplands and Stroud Valley.**



Then there are the Labour/Conservative/Green three ways: **Chalford, Dursley, Rodborough, Stonehouse and The Stanleys.**

There is one Green-Lib Dem-Conservative three way: **Wotton-under-Edge. Kingswood,** although they only gained it last time, looks safe for the Liberal Democrats.

But again, let's flag up that Stroud was already electorally active and volatile before the splits in Labour. Parties that were out of contention last time could surge. Conservative unpopularity could make what look like decent Tory majorities vanish. In other words: anything can happen here - and it probably will.

Sunderland

Current council
47 Lab, 13 Con, 12 LD, 2 Ind, Ref 1
Seats up
12 Lab, 6 Con, 4 LD, 2 Ind, 1 Ref

Labour's post-Brexit crisis in Sunderland appears to have passed. In 2021 their majority crashed from 21 seats to just nine.

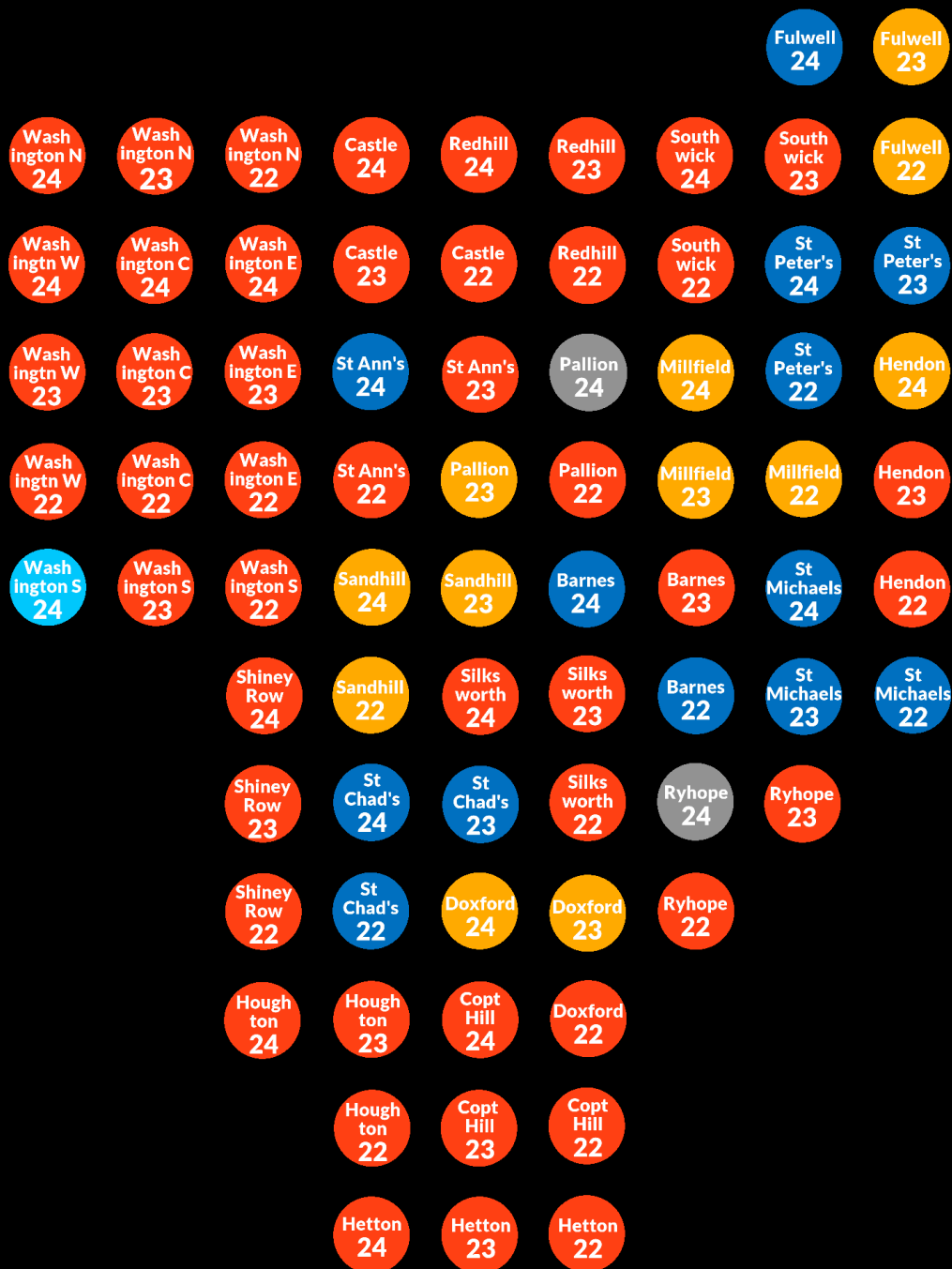
Their vote share across the city crashed from 54% in 2016 to 47% in 2018 and a shocking 33% in 2019. At the lowest ebb of the Brown and Callaghan Labour governments their vote was still around 40%.

Sunderland was part of that phenomenon of Labour doing worse - far worse - after a decade plus of Conservative government, when convention would dictate voters clamouring to project Labour as a prospective government, than it did in the depths of its own unpopularity when governing.

It wasn't just Brexit that caused Labour's grip on Sunderland to loosen - though of course it was this place that was the first to give Leave an oversize share of the vote in the 2016 referendum. This just aggravated the divide between Labour's MPs and their northern voters.

Poor services, a shiny new town hall opening in the midst of the cost of living crisis and the general complacency of a party that had taken Sunderland voters for granted. This is the no-nonsense north and there was little sympathy for Jeremy Corbyn's brand of southern metropolitan left-wingery.

Sunderland differs from Newcastle in a lot of ways but one of the big differences is the absence of a university quarter



to add a different type of Labour constituency to the mix. Sunderland is gritty and tough: a mix of the city itself, surrounding former pit villages and the New Town of Washington.

And, of course, it wasn't just in local elections this malaise was reflected.

At the 2015 general election, Conservative candidates in the city's three constituencies polled almost 24,000 votes. In 2019 they polled 40,685.

It would be wrong to characterise Sunderland as uniformly Labour - the city itself in particular. There have always been Conservative enclaves in the centre of the city strong enough to survive the miners' strike, the Blair surge, austerity and other malaise inflicted by conventional Tory leadership at Westminster.

In recent years as voters have abandoned Labour it has actually been the non-Sunderland parts of Sunderland that have saved Labour. 2021's result was an example. Of the thirteen wards that cover the city itself, Labour won just three, all north of the Wear. The Conservatives won six and the Lib Dems four.

Yet of the nine wards to the south and west of Sunderland - the villages that used to be part of Durham and most still think of themselves that way, plus

huge Washington - Labour won them all. Aside from a few successful independent challenges, always has.

This was one of the big problems Labour had: it ran Sunderland without having many councillors serving the city itself.

Boris Johnson's shenanigans during the Covid lockdown knocked the Conservative surge in Sunderland on the head; then as Labour moved back towards the sort of party the city's voters recognised, and some investment began to show, the Tories started to regress, at least for the time being.

At their peak the Conservative group numbered eighteen councillors (out of 75, so don't let me leave the impression they were at the gates of power!) After the 2023 local elections they slipped to thirteen and with this year shaping up to be somewhat similar to last they may return to single figures - their default number.

At their peak the Tories can win up to about 35% of the vote (much higher within Sunderland itself and far worse in the surrounds). At their worst - like 2023 - they poll under 20%.

Their 19% last year still enabled them to retain three wards - all saints: **St Chad's**, **St Michael's** and **St Peter's**. They would normally also have a lock on

Fulwell on the city's north eastern coast but the Lib Dems have supplanted them there.

Barnes, right in the middle of the city has a roughly 60/40 record of returning Tories over Labour councillors since 2004 but this one went Labour last year too, if by only 142 votes.

Assuming the Tories can hold those three Saint wards, their 2021 exposure comes in **Barnes**, **Ryhope** (one of the massively Leave pit village wards that was always Labour until it elected a UKIP councillor, and then a Tory) and Wearside's **St Anne's**. The Conservative in **Ryhope** has since become an independent.

The Lib Dems have not suffered the setbacks the Tories have: they supplanted them as the largest opposition party in 2023 and will widen this lead this year, even if they can't manage to hold every one of the gains they made from Labour in 2021.

The hardest for them to defend will be **Hendon**, the coastal ward right in the centre of the city. They haven't been able to take the other two seats here since their 2021 gain, though it was very close (thirteen votes) last year in a countermanded election. But it may have been that close because the election was countermanded, enabling the full LD campaign organisation to focus on it a few weeks

after all other wards had chosen.

If they lose **Hendon** they should be able to offset it by gaining the last Tory seat in **Fulwell**. The Conservative vote in Fulwell hasn't fallen away that much - it was only down four points in last year's contest compared to 2019, but the Lib Dems were up nearly 29 points to overwhelm them. Last year's loss was massive: LD 47%, Con 26% (with Lab on 18%) so there's little prospect of a Tory hold here.

Otherwise, the wards the Lib Dems held in 2021 are the wards then held in 2023: **Doxford**, **Millfield**, **Pallion** and **Sandhill** - they all look secure. But they haven't managed to widen their scope: there aren't any other opportunities for them at the moment.

The Greens briefly had a councillor in Washington (**Washington South** ward) but he resigned and the Tories actually gained his seat in the by-election. Last year Labour held a different seat - but by only 101. The Tory councillor has defected to Reform UK and is up this year. In a microcosm of what Reform looks likely to do at the General Election, he will almost certainly split the Tory vote and let Labour win more comfortably.

Some fairly confusing realignment of votes is going on here as

UKIP, with its sizeable vote, has come off the ballot. An example was that Lib Dem overtaking of the Tories in **Fulwell** - where did their 29 point surge come from?

Partly from Labour to beat the Tories, sure, but also from UKIP. And in **Washington South**, Tories were up 20.5 points on 2019 (because of that by-election bounce) but Labour rose by 18.8. That's why the Tories lost.

Washington is Labour's bridgehead in Sunderland. Their absolute lock on the New Town's fifteen councillors is what prevents them from losing control of the council even when the voters of the city itself are rejecting them almost wholesale. The lowest Labour share in Washington beyond South was 56.4%; the highest 68.2%.

An independent candidate was quite close to Labour in **Hetton** [le-Hole]: the most southerly ward, and might get closer if he persists, but the 305 vote gap will still be challenging to close.

Labour's council majority is likely to climb further: back into the twenties, after this set of elections.

Swindon

Current council
32 Lab, 23 Con, 1 LD, 1 Ind

Seats up
14 Con, 5 Lab

The political principle behind elections by thirds is stability. That manifests in two ways: first it normally prevents landslide changes between parties with a horde of inexperienced councillors suddenly running important services.

But it's also about the stability of the principal political parties. given that any government may experience one year of extreme unpopularity, but three - three quarters of a typical parliamentary term, are unlikely.

Unfortunately, 2024 is likely to be that third year for the Conservatives. Swindon will be one of the prime examples of what happens when one exceptionally good year is followed by three poor ones. The Tories are going to get absolutely smashed.

In 2021, they held a comfortable thirteen seat majority in Swindon. After May 2nd, Labour is going to hold a much larger majority. Just a quarter of the seats up this year are Labour-held. And last year the Conservatives held just two of the tranche up.



Swindon

If that performance is replicated, Swindon will have something like 43 Labour councillors, 11 Conservatives and 2 Lib Dems.

There is one outlying single councillor ward up for election this year that the Conservatives should hold: **Ridgeway**.

This ward will be moving to the new East Wiltshire constituency along with two of the other best Tory wards in the south of the district. This will be a problem for Sir Robert Buckland, who'd have had a near-impossible task holding Swindon South on the current boundaries at the current time, let alone the new ones.

These are the seats Labour gained last year and by how much. Conservative seats in all these are up again this year.

Priory Vale	157	5.5
St Andrew's	220	5.8
Shaw	216	7.0
St Margaret	356	10.8
Chiseldon	366	13.6
Lydiard	391	13.9
Penhill	407	14.9
Haydon Wick	652	20.5

In addition a Conservative seat in **Central** is up this year. Labour won that ward last year with 62%. And there's a Tory seat in **Rodbourne Cheney** where Labour polled 60.5% last year.

There was a very much narrower Conservative defeat to the Lib Dems in the south-western outlying ward of **Wroughton and Wichelstowe**; the Lib Dems winning by twenty votes.

Swindon is one of the classic swing towns: fast-growing, affluent, part of the M4 tech corridor and on a long-term path to the Conservatives having once been a Labour railway town.

But that gradual deepening of its Conservatism is not so deep that it can withstand three years of increasing dismay at the government's performance.

Labour will move so far ahead this year that their spell in power will last at least four years.

Tameside

**Current council 51 Lab, 6 Con
Seats up 17 Lab, 2 Con**

There are local authorities that never get into the headlines for scandals or mismanagement or splits, or shock election results. They just get on quietly, anonymously to the rest of the world, administering their district. And they may even be named so opaquely most won't even know where they are located.

Tameside is one of these. This is the area east of Manchester

between Oldham and Stockport. It covers Ashton-under-Lyne, Stalybridge and Hyde, Denton and Droylsden.

There is only one safe Conservative ward in the whole district: the rural **Stalybridge South** ward, though the party also holds seats in three other wards: **Hyde Godley** (which is a surprise), **Hyde Werneth** (which usually elects them), and Ashton Hurst (Tory only in their very best years...other than 2023).

There are a few other wards which do the political equivalent of showing the Tories some leg: that give them a decent vote and a sniff of a chance, but almost never get them over the line: **Audenshaw**, **Stalybridge North** and **Dukinfield-Stalybridge** for example.

But some wards look closer than, in reality they are, because Labour didn't perform especially well in the all-out elections last year.

In **Mossley**, for example, Labour only averaged 35.4%. But then four opponents split the remaining 64% almost evenly: the nearest (the Green) got less than 19%.

In just two wards did all three Labour councillors win with more than 50% of the vote.

And this is the story of Tameside: not massively

impressive Labour shares, beyond a small core, but the opposition vote split, making their wins comfortable.

There is also one ward where the Greens are a close second, and where they won one seat, once: **Ashton Waterloo**. They lost that seat last year by 315. Of the seats up this year, the Tories are defending two: **Stalybridge South** and **Hyde Godley**. The Conservative in Godley doesn't have a majority to defend: she polled the same number of votes as the Labour loser: 1,139 and presumably won after a drawing of lots.

There are two wards in which the Tories won seats last year but where it is a Labour councillor up for election this year: **Ashton Hurst** with a 72 majority, and **Hyde Werneth** where they were 74 ahead.

Werneth should be easier for the Tories to gain because it has a long history of voting Conservative: they shouldn't really have lost any of the seats last year.

They are 192 behind in **Dukinfield-Stalybridge** and 265 in **Audenshaw**. But it's not obvious where the Tories are going to find these extra votes, especially right now.

An independent almost won **Stalybridge North**, falling just 108 short, and might find it easier in a one-v-one fight.

There isn't an especially large Muslim bloc in Tameside; the largest numbers being in the wards closest to Gorton: Droylsden and Denton. This isn't Oldham despite the proximity.

Nonetheless, given that Ashton is represented in parliament by Angela Rayner there may be some effort to run independents to embarrass the party - highly unlikely to succeed. Not here.

There will be another large Labour majority after these elections and no one will pay much attention to it, yet again.

Tamworth

Current council

14 Con, 9 Lab, 7 Ind

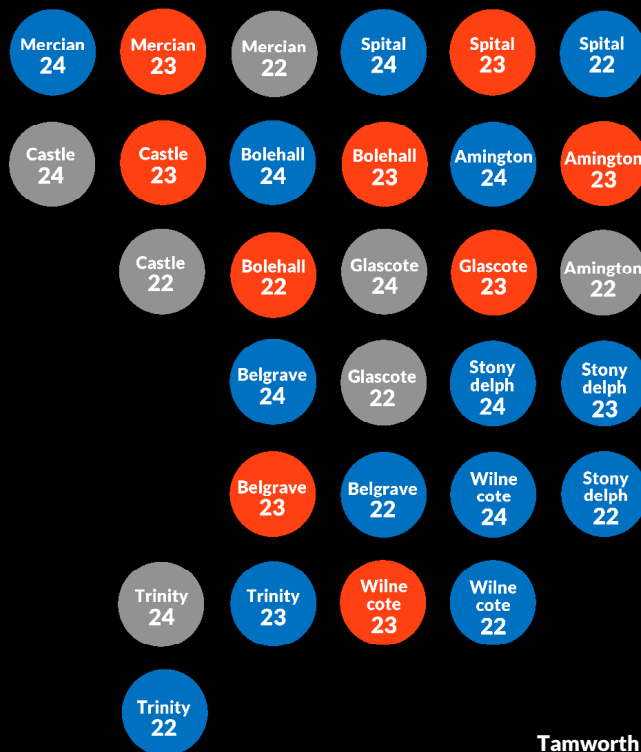
Seats up

7 Con, 3 Ind

The Conservatives were already heading for trouble in Tamworth after the local elections last year, having enjoyed several years of landslide wins in this compact, small council.

They had already lost five councillors in 2022 in a split that appeared caused by Tories just not liking each other very much. Their poor result in 2023 removed the Tory majority for the first time since 2004.

But then the area's MP, Chris Pincher, was forced to resign



Tamworth

over his drunken groping tendencies and Labour won the by-election to replace him in October.

That said, it's not obvious that the by-election will make the Conservatives' plight on the council much worse because they were already getting spanked beforehand.

Last May the Tories won just two seats and Labour eight (though the vote shares do not reflect such a lopsided outcome: Labour polled 44% and the Tories 38%).

This just happens to be an area where the wards are very demographically similar so, as one swings they all tend to swing.

The Conservatives won every ward in 2021, defeating Labour 57% to 29% borough-wide. They aren't having to defend all ten seats this year because three of them are now independent.

If Tamworth votes the way it did last year, Labour will win control of the council with something like 16 seats. There'll be nine

Tories and four of the independents left. But it could be worse for the Conservatives. They held **Stonydelph** by 36 votes and **Trinity** by 158.

On the other hand, Labour won several wards incredibly narrowly last year: **Amington** by 22, **Castle** by 44, **Spital** by 86 and others by one hundred or so. If voters are having buyers' remorse then the Tories could do well enough to deny Labour a majority. But that's incredibly unlikely.

Tandridge

Current council

14 Ind, 11 LD, 9 Con, 8 Res

Seats up

All - boundary changes

Look at that list of Tandridge councillors. The Conservatives aren't first, let alone with a comfortable majority. They aren't even second. There are just nine of them.

Go back to just 2015, however, and the Tories held 35 seats and had a majority of eighteen.

There has been a disintegration of Conservative support in Tandridge of more than thirty points. In 2015 their vote share was 55%. In 2023 it was 25%. But this is not the typical Surrey tale of Brexit driving affluent Remain-voting Tories to switch en masse to the Lib Dems - or at least not the primary story.

Tandridge narrowly voted leave in the 2016 referendum and, aside from a cluster of seats near the border with Croydon, the Lib Dems do not have much of a grip at this end of the county.

No. The Tories' difficulties here are principally locally created.

This is, essentially, all about deeply unpopular housing targets foisted on councils by the government. Tandridge was set a target of around 6,000 new homes, most of which were to be built on green-field sites across this part of the North Downs.

Voters here expected their Conservative councillors to conserve their area, not meekly cave to the government. The council chose to offer up vast sites where these homes would be permitted to be built and voters responded by booting them out of office.

Although Tandridge is technically under no overall control, the Independents and Residents Association (OLRG) councillors are effectively one, giving them a majority of two seats over the Lib Dems and Conservatives.

The pendulum may have swung as far as it can now because this new administration is now facing the same problems the Conservatives did. They have been locked in a battle with the

Planning Inspectorate that has rejected their local plan.

Without one it will be far harder to prevent sporadic, unplanned development in the district, but submitting one will put them in exactly the same place the Tories ended up before the backlash.

The whole council is up for election this year and it will be interesting to see if the tide has turned now the residents are experiencing the challenges of power.

The warding pattern has broadly been retained. There are a few more three-councillor wards and a few fewer two-councillor wards. And one extra councillor.

There are likely to be only four wholly Conservative wards: **Chaldon (1), Warlingham West (2)** and **Woldingham (1)**.

There are five other Tory councillors at the moment, either representing single councillor wards or in splits. These boundary changes fuse some wards together and make it difficult to project a likely outcome in an all-out election.

For example Dormansland and Felcourt, and Fellbridge are effectively amalgamated. The Tories hold single member Fellbridge while Dormansland has two independents. The new ward is likely to elect either two

independents and one Tory, or three independents, narrowly.

Likewise, Lib Dem Portley and split (1 Con, 1 LD) Queens Park are merged. The new ward probably elects three Lib Dems.

Assuming things are broadly the same as the last two rounds of elections and there's little Tory revival, the Lib Dems should win approximately fourteen or fifteen - an improvement on their current numbers. This assumes they win Tory seats in split or amalgamated wards.

The Oxted and Limsfield Residents are deeply embedded in their three wards (there are two Oxted wards) for eight seats.

The remainder are independent wards - perhaps as many as fifteen councillors though, as with the Lib Dem wards, there are Tory councillors within these wards, and more are marginal. If there is a Tory resurgence it'll start in these wards.

There are no Labour targets in Tandridge: the highest vote they've managed in recent elections was just under 17% in Westway - one of the Caterham wards. Tandridge is partly like the southern wards of Croydon: Sanderstead, Coulsdon and Purley; before it turns into rolling countryside: these are not Labour areas: not now, not historically.

There is a range of possibilities in these hard-to-call all-out elections. The best the Conservatives can probably hope for is to make sufficient gains to remove the residents-independents majority and shrink the Lib Dem group a little. The worst is that they lose their grip on that cluster of what are now split wards, or in amalgamated wards - which will leave them with just a small rump of councillors.

Three Rivers

Current council

21 LD, 12 Con, 3 Lab, 2 Grn, 1 Ind
Seats up
7 LD, 4 Con, 1 Lab, 1 Ind

There is the faintest chance that the Liberal Democrats could lose their majority in this corner of south west Hertfordshire, just across the London boundary with Northwood, Pinner and Harefield.

In the weeks prior to the local elections they lost one of their councillors (whose seat is up this year) to independent. That, in turn, trimmed the Lib Dem majority to three seats.

The Greens are then favoured to win the remaining Lib Dem seat in **Dickinsons** (Croxley Green South) so, assuming they win back the independent seat in **Penn Hill and Mill End** their majority will remain at three.

Thurrock

Current council

23 Con, 19 Lab, 7 Ind

Seats up

12 Con, 4 Lab, 1 ind

Thurrock is one of the councils that have been compelled to declare effective bankruptcy - and the savage cuts and large council tax rises is going to be the main reason for a big Conservative loss this year.

It's not just that the council cannot balance its books: it's the manner of this financial debacle that has enraged residents.

Seemingly without any political authority, let alone scrutiny, the council's finance director invested around £900 million in bonds through which 53 solar farms were purchased.

Note: the council didn't buy the solar farms itself: they funded a firm to buy them. The idea was that the higher market-rate interest this capital financing firm would pay Thurrock would exceed the lower rates the council paid on the loans it procured from fellow local authorities - the difference helping fund council services.

Aside from the huge problems of the lack of authority to make this transaction - worth an entire year's spending by Thurrock - and the hugely dubious nature of this deal,

what might happen if the company involve went bankrupt. Which, of course, happened.

This was the biggest council "bankruptcy" in local government history. What it meant for Thurrock residents was massive Council Tax rises, sell-offs and closures of council assets and the end of all discretionary spending.

This was not the first time that a council officer created an epic financial calamity for their authority without notifying councillors: the infamous Hammersmith & Fulham rate swaps case in 1988 happened much the same way. Councils that have, more recently, come unstuck with property deals also point to government encouragement to look to such novel means to fund services.

Nonetheless, allocating blame for these scandals is secondary to the reality that the debt cannot be magicked away and the party in charge is going to get the blame.

Hence, despite all the gain Conservatives have made in heavily Leave-voting places like Thurrock it's going to be swept away as voters seek vengeance.

Thurrock has a complex set of electoral arrangements comprising mainly two-councillor wards (for now - there are all out elections next year).

Labour is strongest along the Thames-side: the docks at Tilbury and Grays, and Thurrock town itself, They held four seats here in 2021: **Grays Thurrock, Grays Riverside, Tilbury St Chads** and **West Thurrock and South Stifford**. They'd be safe anyway but especially this year.

The Conservatives mirrored this last year - they won four wards in 2023: **Aveley & Uplands, Corringham & Fobbing, Little Thurrock Rectory** and **Ockenden**. All of these bar Little Thurrock Rectory are up for election this year.

If the Conservatives are not going to be obliterated this year then, in addition to the three seats they held last year they should also hold **Orsett** - the rural north of the district, and **Chafford and North Stifford**.

Then there are a set of wards that have a Labour history but have swung heavily from that party for years now. Some went straight to the Tories, others ended this way via UKIP. They are wards like **Little Thurrock Blackshots** and **The Homesteads**. **Aveley and Uplands** is another - which stayed Tory last year (by 94 votes).

By the way, it's entirely possible for the Conservatives to do worse this year, even if the Tories are doing better nationally, because the impact of the cuts and tax rises is a year on: it's a year greater.

But three leaves very little margin for error, even though the Lib Dems have been strong at holding all their wards (other than Dickinsons) recently.

If the Tories could gain the seat in **Penn and Mill End** (they were 256 votes shy last year) the Lib Dems would have 19 seats - one short of a majority.

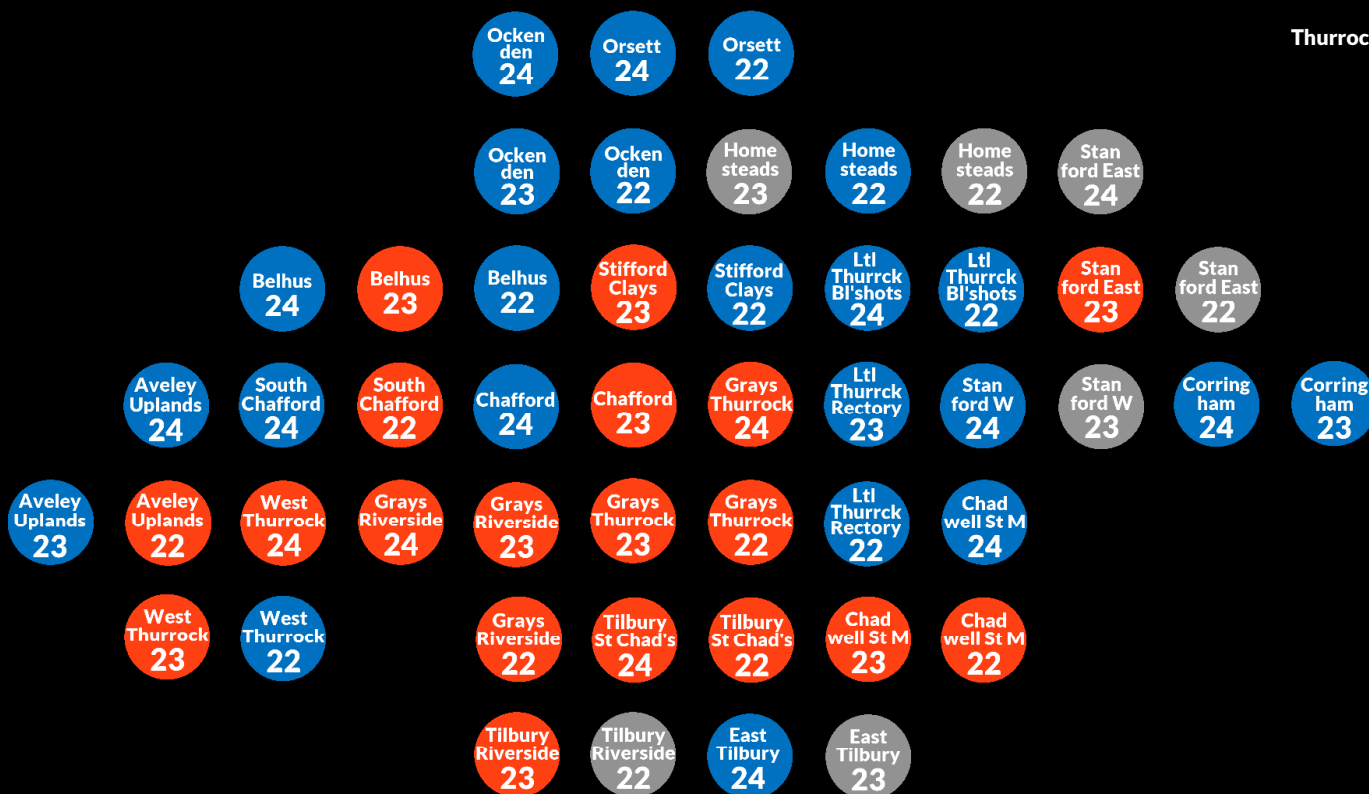
Everything else is much harder for the Conservatives. Beyond the wards they hold and Penn, they polled almost exactly 25% in every other ward.

That sort of share isn't insignificant but it's nowhere near enough to mount a challenge against the Lib Dems who are twenty or thirty points ahead.

The Tories also need to keep an eye on their Rickmansworth Town seat. The Lib Dems were only 115 votes behind last year.

The Greens have, for now, no targets beyond Dickinsons and, while Labour is safe in its safe but out of place **South Oxhey** ward, they can't win anywhere else either.

The growing Lib Dem presence in Hertfordshire began in Three Rivers: they have had a majority here for all but two years since 1999. It'd be odd - and still unlikely - if they lost control here while extending their influence in other Herts districts.



Belhus and **Chadwell St Mary** voted Labour massively last year and look like certain Tory losses this year.

There are independents in Thurrock split into two strands: genuine independents and what the UKIP group mutated into. Independents of either type should be a popular receptacle of votes given few here are going to be enthusiastic about either big party. **East Tilbury** and **Stanford East and Corringham Town** are likely to elect independent councillors.

Then there are **South Chafford** and **Stanford le Hope West** which went Labour the last time a seat here was up for election but not by much. If the Tories hold these it'd be remarkable.

Labour needs six seats for a majority. That would not likely be achievable in this council normally given how far it has moved away from them in the last couple of decades. But it's eminently possible now because of the council's financial burden.

Trafford

Current council
41 Lab, 10 Con, 6 LD, 6 Grn
Seats up
13 Lab, 4 Con, 2 LD, 2 Grn

Until 1996, Trafford council: the suburbs of Manchester to the south west, had never been anything other than Conservative or (occasionally) under no overall control. Then the massive Labour surge in the run-up to the 1997 general election gave them a majority

here - but only just. In 1996 they beat the Tories 44% to 42%; in 1998 44.6 to 44.5.

The largest majority Labour managed was nine seats before the Conservatives reasserted themselves and regained power in 2004.

Today Labour has a strong lock on Trafford. They probably haven't quite reached the point where they would hold it at their lowest ebbs in government but, in an even year Trafford would stay Labour, easily.

Perhaps surprisingly, Labour's vote across the district is (a bit) lower than it was in that pre-1997 period. They polled 41% last year, for example. The big difference is that the Tories only managed 27%: the story of Trafford is the collapse of the Conservative vote.

When the Conservative government redrew English councils prior to 1973 they intentionally created entities like Trafford, putting inner city Labour minorities together with a much larger amount of Tory-voting suburbs. This maximised the number of councils they could control. Stockport was exactly the same.

This worked well for as long as the suburbs voted Conservative and then became a horror show for the party when they began not to.

They are now pinned back to the affluent commuter town of **Hale**, the **Manor** ward of south west Sale, and rural **Bowdon**.

Labour is still not especially popular in the commuter villages and towns of Altrincham and the south of the district, but that's little consolation for the Tories because voters here plump for the Lib Dems and, more recently, the Greens too. Green councillors polled over 60% in the all-out elections last year, and they managed to gain neighbouring **Hale Central** last year too. This

one's still marginal - but then so too was **Altrincham** once, and the Tories weren't able to prevent it slipping inexorably away. The Lib Dems took a firm grip on the two Timperley wards where, until recently, the Tories had been winning their contests.

There are three "middle Trafford" wards that the Tories would probably be able to win in the mid term of a Labour government but which are firmly unwinnable for them right now: **Davyhulme**, **Flixton** and **Lostock and Barton** (the old Davyhulme East).

The Tories are more competitive in three wards around Sale: **Broadheath**, **Brooklands** and - just about - **Ashton-upon-Mersey**. Of these, Broadheath split last year and it's the Conservative councillor who is up this year. He had a majority of only nineteen votes last year. Labour was seven percentage points ahead in this ward.

The Tories are more likely than not to lose a little more ground in Trafford this year. They are vulnerable in split Broadheath and may not be able to stave the Greens off in Bowdon - they were ahead by 147.

Trafford, originally drawn to lock Labour out of power, has now changed its locks to stop the Conservatives winning.

Tunbridge Wells

Current council

17 LD, 11 Con, 9 TWA,

7 Lab, 4 Ind

Seats up

All - boundary changes

Tunbridge Wells has the characteristics of those heavily Remain districts of west Surrey AND the local problems of Tandridge East Surrey) which have combined to create a nightmare for the Conservatives.

The local aggravation to Tory unpopularity in this 55% Remain-voting district was a £50 million development of the town centre, including a new Town Hall. Councillors building themselves plush new offices never goes down especially well despite promises that most of the site would be let out to make the scheme pay for itself over the medium term.

The plans split the Conservative group and led to the formation of the Tunbridge Wells Alliance (TWA) that rapidly became one of the most effective grassroots vessels for challenging entrenched party politics.

Tunbridge Wells is undergoing some pretty radical boundary changes, converting what are mainly two-councillor wards into (almost) uniform ones of three (a 2-member ward

survives and **High Brooms** becomes a single-member). There are nine fewer councillors too.

This is arguably the most eclectic council in the country, not just in there being five different affiliations represented (though the Greens are yet to find a way to a win) but that votes are so evenly divided that nine of the current wards currently split their representation. This is going to be further muddled as wards get slammed together in the boundary review.

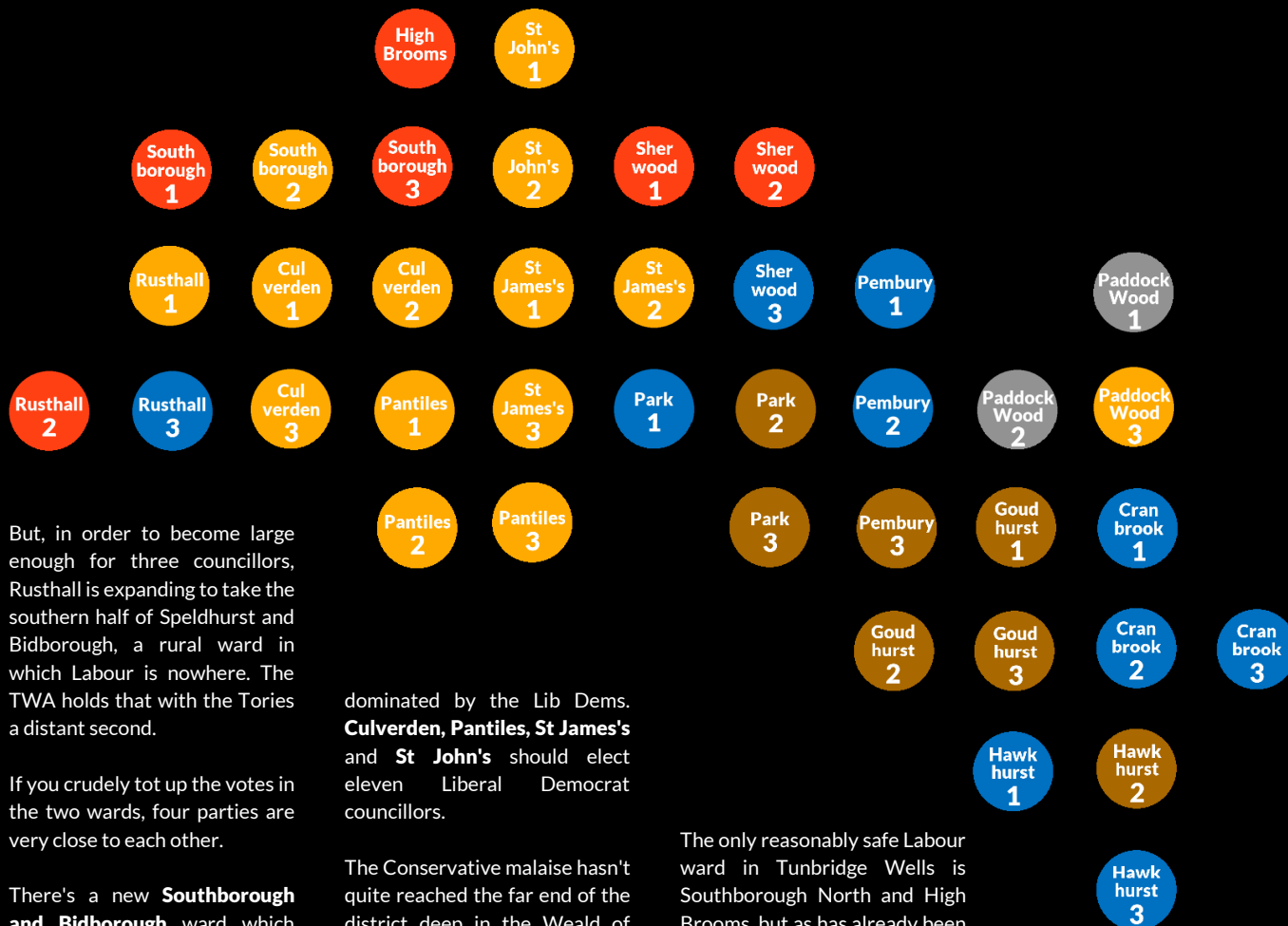
It's essentially impossible without extraordinary local knowledge to work out how these new configurations will vote.

To take three examples:

The two **Paddock Wood** wards have been merged. Paddock Wood East has an independent and a Tunbridge Wells Alliance (TWA) councillor. Paddock Wood West a Labour and a Liberal Democrat.

To further complicate things, the TWA did not stand against the independent in 2023 but they'll have to this year to stand a chance of holding their own seat.

Then there's **Rusthall** - the western suburbs of Tunbridge Wells - which, at the moment, is a Labour-Lib Dem marginal in which Labour holds both seats.



But, in order to become large enough for three councillors, Rusthall is expanding to take the southern half of Speldhurst and Bidborough, a rural ward in which Labour is nowhere. The TWA holds that with the Tories a distant second.

If you crudely tot up the votes in the two wards, four parties are very close to each other.

There's a new **Southborough and Bidborough** ward which essentially merges the long-term Labour ward of Southborough and High Brooms (minus High Brooms) and the Lib Dem-Conservative marginal of **Southborough North**. Plus the Bidborough end of Speldhurst and Bidborough.

There are some outcomes we can be reasonably confident about. Tunbridge Wells itself is

dominated by the Lib Dems. **Culverden, Pantiles, St James's** and **St John's** should elect eleven Liberal Democrat councillors.

The Conservative malaise hasn't quite reached the far end of the district deep in the Weald of Kent. These wards haven't escaped the major boundary redrawing but the Tories should win most, if not all seats in **Cranbrook, Sissinghurst and Frittenden**, and **Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden**.

The TWA should hold the massive central ward of **Goudhurst, Lamberhurst and Horsmonden**, and **Park**.

The only reasonably safe Labour ward in Tunbridge Wells is Southborough North and High Brooms, but as has already been discussed, this is amalgamated and becomes tougher for the party to hold. The new single-councillor High Brooms ward should be strongly Labour however. Otherwise, Labour wins whatever seats it can in this district in skirmishes with other parties.

That leaves the toss-ups. **Pembury and Capel** fuses those

two separate entities together. Pembury elected a TWA councillor last year but has two Tory councillors. The Lib Dems won single-member Capel in 2021 with 75% of the vote. But it has much less voting power than Pembury.

Sherwood is a long-term Labour-Conservative marginal

with two of the former and one of the latter representing it at the moment. It hasn't been redrawn much so Labour might win all three or the Tories may win one.

The only certain predictions about Tunbridge Wells are that its council will remain under no overall control and the other parties will continue to lock the Conservatives out of power.

Wakefield

Current council

48 Lab, 5 Con, 4 Ind, 3 LD, 3 WIG

Seats up

12 Lab 3 Ind 3 WIG 2 Con 1 LD

The Conservatives have been serially embarrassed by far too many of the MPs elected in 2019, be it the findings of sleaze against Owen Paterson and Scott Benton, allegations of sexual impropriety against Chris Pincher, David Warburton, Peter Bone and Neil Parish, or just flouncing off in a tantrum: Nadine Dorries, Chris Skidmore and Nigel Adams.

But the conviction on historic child sex abuse charges against Wakefield Conservative MP Imran Ahmed Khan were perhaps the most damaging - both immediately and in the longer term for the party.

2019 was the first time the Conservatives had won

Wakefield since the second world war and followed their gain of the cross-district Morley and Outwood seat in 2015.

Labour convincingly - though not overwhelmingly - regained Wakefield in the ensuing by-election and, since then, have been able to sit back and watch the Conservatives implode.

In 2021, before the Khan scandal erupted and with the impetus of the Boris Covid bounce behind them, the Tories won eight of the thirteen seats up for election. These gains weren't confined to Wakefield itself but stretched across this district immediately south of Leeds.

They included **Pontefract South** where voters continued to react to MP Yvette Cooper's attempts to block Brexit despite her constituency voting 70% to leave the EU.

And they included former mining wards in the Hemsworth constituency: **Crofton, Ryhill and Walton**, and **Ackworth, North Elmsall and Upton**.

This year the Conservatives will only be defending two of those eight seats won in 2021: Pontefract South and Wakefield Rural. The other six have resigned from the Conservative group; three in the Wakefield Independent Group and three as plain independents.

Whatever their label, their prospects of winning are miserable. Labour swept every single ward bar Lib Dem Knottingley last year, beating the Tories 53% to 22% district-wide. In 2021 the gap was just five points.

Note though that this was still far better than the outcome in 1995 at the depth of the last Tory trough. Then Wakefield split 75% Labour to 13% Conservative. In other words, despite the by-election loss, despite the humiliating cause of it, and despite the Tories national unpopularity there has still been an underlying move from Labour.

The Conservatives might hope to hold **Wakefield Rural** and **Wakefield South**: they lost these two last year by just 14 and 69 votes apiece. South, in particular, nearly always votes Conservative.

Everything else looks hopeless, though the Tories weren't entirely out of the picture in **Horbury and South Ossett** and **Pontefract South**.

There may be some Gaza turmoil in Wakefield town: there is a fairly large Muslim population in **Wakefield East** and, to a lesser extent, **Wakefield North** and **Wakefield West**. But the Labour group has held together so far - why not when it's the Tories doing all the splitting?

But the Conservatives cannot hope to regain any footing here while losing the district by over thirty points.

Walsall

Current council

37 Con, 12 Lab, 11 Ind

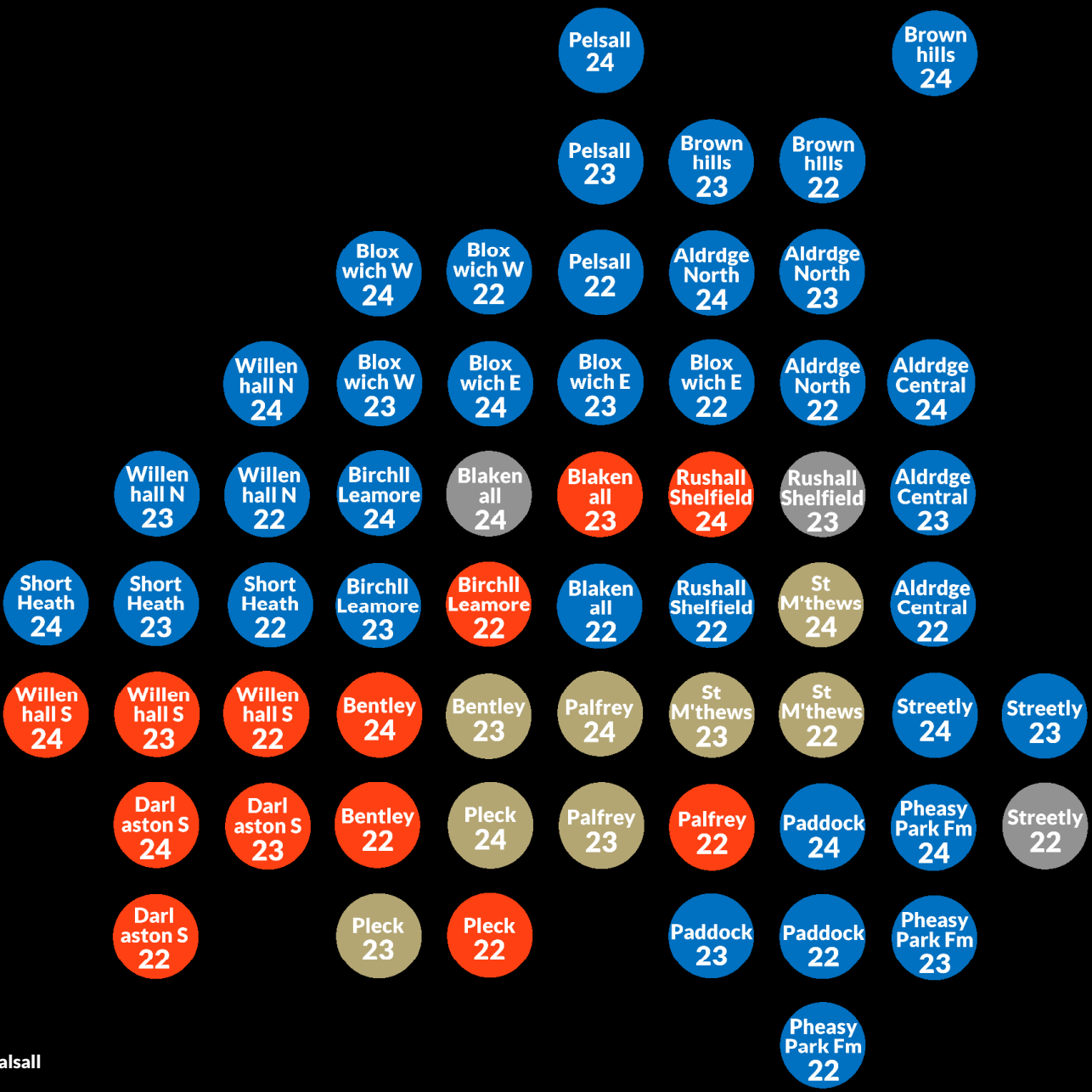
Seats up

12 Con, 4 Lab, 4 Ind

From a district (Wakefield) where the Conservatives have shot themselves in the foot, to one where Labour has blown both legs and much of its torso off over the years.

Walsall should be a safe Labour district. Yes, there is affluent, Aldridge and the rural extent down to the edge of Sutton Coldfield. But north Walsall has one of the highest shares of council housing in the country (31%) while the south is almost a third Asian, concentrated in a few wards like **Palfrey, Pleck** and **St Matthew's**.

Yet in thirty eight rounds of local elections since 1973, Labour has won a majority in just seven. There are councils where Labour underperforms its parliamentary showing: Wirral and Hillingdon for example. But Walsall is another: people here simply do not trust Labour to run their council even while being happy to send Labour MPs to Westminster (at least until Brexit).



Walsall

If you want advice on how to split a group, come and consult Walsall Labour. The party was beset by left-right splits since the early 1980s right through until 2016. The left, led by "Citizen" Dave Church, wanted to divide Walsall into 54 elected neighbourhood councils. Church and his colleagues were expelled in the run-up to the 1997 general election.

These expelled councillors then formed the Walsall Democratic Labour Party. They didn't enjoy huge electoral success: they failed to defend any of their seats or gain any off Labour. They subsequently morphed into the Socialist Alliance and then TUSC. But one of their number was able to win a seat in **Blakenall** on and off until 2011.

By 2016, though, Labour was grappling with problems over Brexit. The authority area voted 68% Leave and Labour was on the wrong side of that vote.

The area also had two marginal constituencies but, somewhat like Southampton, they began to diverge. Walsall South with its ethnic diversity just about stayed loyal to Labour: this constituency contains some very secure Tory wards and most of the safer Labour seats too.

Much whiter, more council estate dominated Walsall North (where the Leave share would almost certainly have been even

larger) switched to the Conservatives in 2017. In 2019, new Tory MP Eddie Hughes won by nearly 12,000 votes. This swing was reflected in local elections. Once Labour-leaning wards like **Brownhills**, the two Bloxwich wards, **Birchalls-Leamore** and **Rushall-Shelfield** started to routinely return Conservative councillors.

The Conservatives gained a majority in 2019 - it now stands at sixteen seats. In dreadful 2023, the Tories held every single seat they had to defend.

And then in autumn 2023 the Labour group split in half, over Gaza. Both the group leader and his deputy were among those who quit. There are now just twelve Labour councillors out of sixty.

On the positive side for Labour, this split means they only have to defend four seats this year (independents have four seat up though one is a genuine elected independent). But independents in **Palfrey**, **Pleck** and **St Matthew's** in particular will be hard for them to regain if the independents defend their seats or organise others to stand.

There were only three especially close elections last year in a Tory ward: Short Heath, where they won by just 72, **Birchalls-Leamore**, won by 147, and **Rushall-Shelfield** by 135. In the latter, though, a Labour seat is up this year and it

wouldn't be the most absurd outcome if the Tories gained it. The last time Labour won Short Heath was 1980.

To make matters worse, there was a 12% swing to the Tories in Palfrey last year - pre Gaza splits. There may have been local circumstances in that result, but it's an extra worry in what should be Walsall's Labour core.

It's mathematically possible for the Tories to lose their majority this year - but it's incredibly unlikely that they will. They would need to lose more than half the seats they're defending and, remember, they defended every single one last year,

Labour needs to focus more on rebuilding its group against its Gaza splitters. Most of them aren't up for election this year, so they'll remain split - at least until voters have their say.

Warrington

Current council
36 Lab, 10 Con, 8 LD, 4 Ind
Seats up All

The last of the councils that elect every four years is Warrington.

Labour should have little difficulty retaining control given how easily they held on in 2021.

There are no safe Conservative seats here: of the eleven they won last time nine were gains. It's entirely possible there could be no Tory seats after the May election.

On the other hand, several Labour wards were poised on a knife-edge last time so, if there is - for whatever reason - an improved Conservative performance, they could end up with a bunch more seats.

The Conservatives have to fend off the Liberal Democrats in two wards to the south of the Manchester Ship Canal: three seats in **Appleby** and one in split **Lymm South**.

All other Conservative seats are vulnerable to Labour. Their majorities run from just three seats in **Birchwood** to 289 in **Culceth, Glazebury and Croft**.

One Conservative councillor in **Rixton and Woolston** has defected to Labour, and one Labour councillor has moved to independent.

If there's a swing to the Tories then presumably they'll gain seats in the split wards of **Birchwood, Chapelford and Old Hall** and **Rixton and Walton**. But Labour only just won **Great Sankey North** and **Whittle Hall, Latchford North, Orford, Poulton North** and **Westbrook**.

If there's a Lib Dem to Conservative swing **Grappenhall and Stockton North** come into play.

There are also three elected independents in **Penketh and Cuerdley** who won their seats off Labour in 2021 but who aren't secure.

Warrington has two opposing forces pulling it. One is Brexit and the cultural issues linked to that vote. The town voted 55% Leave.

The other is that it is within orbit of two big, massively Labour cities: Liverpool and Manchester. In Liverpool especially, backing Labour is more than just casting a vote: it is an intrinsic part of many people's identity (indeed, socialist more than Labour, perhaps).

Liverpool is often described as having a gravitational electoral pull that has made once Tory areas like Chester, Southport, Ormskirk and Wirral Labour.

Warrington seems to be somewhat within that Liverpool City Region tractor-beam and that has helped the town's Labour Party resist the growth of the Conservatives in red wall, Leave-backing towns of Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire.

Watford

**Current council 27 LD, 9 Lab
Seats up 8 LD, 4 Lab**

The Liberal Democrats gained Three Rivers - South West Hertfordshire - in 1999. Four years later they gained Watford, around which Three Rivers wraps itself.

The Lib Dem growth in Watford began shortly after Labour won the 1997 general election. They held just one ward - three seats - in 1991, ten by 1999, twenty in 2003 and twenty seven at the moment.

Watford was one of the first councils to opt for a directly elected mayor and, of the six elections since it was established, the Lib Dems have won every one, beating Labour 2:1 at the last election in 2022.

There are no Conservatives on Watford council and Labour is slightly more exposed this year: they hold one seat in **Callowland** ward where the other two are Lib Dems. The three more strongly Labour wards are **Holywell, Leggatts** and **Vicarage** and should be safe enough.

The Lib Dems polled 49% last year; Labour 31% and the Tories 17.5%. While the Conservative vote fluctuates, this is pretty much how elections have gone in Watford since 2000. Voters

may choose differently in general elections but have a fairly settled position on who should be administering the local council.

Welwyn-Hatfield

**Current council
22 Con, 14 LD, 12 Lab
Seats up 14 Con, 2 LD**

The Liberal Democrats are attempting to do in Welwyn-Hatfield what they have done in Watford. They can't win a majority, even if they won all fourteen seats up for election - and they won't do that anyway, but they should become the largest party.

Welwyn-Hatfield is the next best opportunity for the Lib Dems in Hertfordshire, creating a chain of councils from Dacorum and Three Rivers through to the centre of the county.

But Welwyn-Hatfield is not like any of the Lib Dem Herts councils and it will be much tougher for them to progress after this election.

As the name suggests, this council comprises two New Towns: Welwyn Garden City, and Hatfield. New Towns are traditionally strong Labour

areas that have swung to the right, boosted by hugely popular Tory policies like Right to Buy. That said, Hertfordshire new towns have withstood this trend somewhat. Hemel Hempstead switched from Labour to Lib Dem; Labour still dominates Stevenage council and Letchworth is a three-way town.

But the council is larger than these two new towns: Welwyn itself: the settlement the Garden City was built to the south of. And it contains enough rural territory to the south west, just north of Barnet, for two strongly Conservative wards.

Nonetheless, the Lib Dems have established bridgeheads in both Welwyn Garden City (**Peartree, Panshanger, Sherrards and Handside**) and Hatfield (**Hatfield South West and Welham Green and Hatfield South**).

This is yet another place where the Conservatives did extremely well in 2021: they won fourteen of the sixteen seats up, so it's a fair bet they will sustain fairly heavy losses this year.

They are defending their last seats in ten wards: six against Labour and four against the Lib Dems. The table below shows by how much their opponents won these wards last year and, other than the first, it's clear that there is a huge amount of work the Conservatives need to put in

to have any chance of holding them. The last six have such large majorities they look impossible to hold.

Hatfield East	120	6.7
Hatfield Villis	231	14.4
Panshanger	287	18.6
Haldens	335	19.9
Howlands	359	22.9
Handside	708	28.3
Hatfield S.W.*	443	29.4
Sherrards	604	31.4
Hollybush	417	33.6
Hatfield C.	437	35.2

But these ten split wards are not the end of the story. The Green Party came somewhat close in Welwyn West last year: they were 210 (or just over ten points) off. The combined Labour-Lib Dem share here was over sixteen points so there's some scope for a squeeze, or even a deal to stand aside.

The Conservatives should be able to rely on four wards: the two Welwyns and the two in the south east, for a total of twelve. But they are unlikely to hold any seats in Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield after May.

The council will look something like 20 Lib Dems, 18 Labour and 12 Conservatives - but this doesn't reflect the votes cast. Last year, for example, the Tories polled 34%, Labour 31% and the Lib Dems 26%.

This is because the Conservatives stack up their votes in **Brookmans Park, Northaw and Cuffley** and, to a lesser extent **Welwyn East** and **Welwyn West**, while running out of votes in the marginal wards in the centre of the district.

The Conservatives are more or less on par with their performances in the run-up to the 1997 general election. It is Labour who have shed votes to the Lib Dems. In 1995, for example, Labour polled 53%: twenty one points more than they managed last year.

So the Liberal Democrats are making some progress, but to turn Welwyn-Hatfield into a Watford or Dacorum, they need to crush Labour in the twin-towns. There isn't much chance of that for now but things might change if Labour is in government by the time of the 2026 local elections (there are county council elections in 2025).

West Lancashire

Current council
26 Lab, 15 Con, 4 OWL
Seats up
8 Lab, 5 Con, 2 OWL

West Lancashire used to be a battle royal between Labour Skelmersdale (Skem) and pretty

much everywhere else which was Conservative.

Everywhere else" is principally Ormskirk and its northern neighbour Burscough. But at the all-out elections last year, the Conservatives lost their foothold in Ormskirk and are now confined to just five rural wards.

Labour had been slipping back in West Lancashire in recent years, not so much at the hands of the Conservatives but yet another localist party: Our West Lancashire, which amassed seven seats by the time of the boundary changes.

Partly because of the boundary and council size changes and also, perhaps because of Labour's strong result in the February 2023 parliamentary by-election, Labour undid a lot of these losses, sweeping to a comfortable seven seat majority.

Skem produced some massive Labour wins, as usual. Their top candidate in **Old Skelmersdale** polled 94%; in **Skelmersdale North** 89%; 88% in **Tanhouse**; 78% in **Skelmersdale South**; 73% in **Up Holland**. Skem and nearby Bootle compete to be the most Labour places in England.

Of course, stacking up the votes in Skelmersdale is all well and good, but only if Labour still has enough votes elsewhere in the

district. They have right now, but now a huge surplus of them.

For example in **Aughton and Downholland**, their lowest ranked councillor was only 128 votes ahead of the Tories last year. They were just 11 ahead of OWL in **Ormskirk East**, 171 ahead of them in **Ormskirk West**, and **Burscough Town** split. It is the OWL candidate there who is up for election this year.

OWL is acting as a block to the Conservatives recovering in West Lancashire - or rather the two parties are fishing in the same pool of votes and OWL has better bait.

But perhaps things aren't quite as dire for the Conservatives. After all, Labour has fifteen core Skelmersdale seats while the Tories have fifteen rural seats, with Ormskirk and Burscough and the **Rural South** ward comprising a further fifteen that are currently Labour-OWL battles but could become three-way fights if and when Tory popularity recovers.

There probably won't be much change this time. Labour might be hindered a little by there not having been any election excitement in the run up to this year's elections, as there was last year. But there are only three or four marginal seats, and the party holding them probably starts as favourite in each.

West Oxfordshire

Current council

17 LD, 16 Con, 11 Lab,

3 Grn, 2 Ind

Seats up

7 Con, 4 Lab, 3 LD, 2 Ind, 1 Grn

One of the features of once strongly Conservative Remain-voting districts that have turned against the party is the way voters have plumped for different opposition parties to maximise the punishment.

You see this in places like Guildford, Tunbridge Wells, Runnymede and several councils that aren't up for election this year like Arun and Lewes. And it's present in spades in West Oxfordshire.

Different parties are strong in different parts of this large district on the edge of the Cotswolds. The council also has a fairly complex electoral pattern. There are nine single councillor wards, fourteen 2-councillor and just four 3-councillor wards. This means, for a council that elects by thirds, that different sets of seats come up each year.

Labour is strongest in Witney, the largest town in the district, and also **Chipping Norton**, but nowhere else. There is one Conservative seat up for

Kingham
24

Kingham
23

Chipping Norton
24

Chipping Norton
23

Chipping Norton
22

The Bartons
22

Chadlington
24

Hailey
24

Charlbury
24

Charlbury
23

Woodstock
24

Stonesfield
24

Milton under Wychwd
24

Ascott & Shipton
22

Hailey
23

Witney North
24

Witney North
23

Woodstock
22

Stonesfield
23

Burford
22

Witney West
24

Witney Central
24

Witney Central
23

Witney East
24

North Leigh
24

Brize Norton
22

Carterton N.E.
23

Witney West
23

Witney East
23

Witney East
22

Freeland
24

Carterton N.W.
23

Carterton N.E.
22

Witney South
24

Witney South
23

Witney South
22

Freeland
22

Carterton N.W.
22

Carterton Sth
23

Ducklington
22

Eynsham
24

Eynsham
23

Eynsham
22

Alvescot & Filkins
23

Carterton Sth
22

Bampton
23

Bampton
22

Standlake
24

Standlake
22

West Oxfordshire

election in Witney South, with Labour holding the other two.

Greens have burst through in **Brize Norton** and **Witney North** though they hold all three seats in these two wards. They are not massively distant in **Kingham, Rollright and Enstone**, though the Conservatives polled over 50% here last year in what was a poor year.

The Conservatives are defending a seat in **Standlake and Aston** where the other seat is held by the Liberal Democrats.

A Liberal Democrat in **Stonesfield and Tackley** defected to Labour last year and his seat is up this year. Labour only polled 11% here last year but the ward has only 3,400 or so electors and, as such, a hard working councillor with a high profile might hold on - if he wants to.

Two Conservative councillors representing North Leigh and **Freeland and Hanborough** have left the party to serve as independents, and both are up for election this year. North Leigh should be safely Conservative but Freeland and Hanborough's other seat is held by the Liberal Democrats.

West Oxfordshire will stay under no overall control and in the hands of a rainbow coalition led by the Liberal Democrats.

Wigan

Current council
64 Lab, 9 Ind, 2 Con
Seats up
21 Lab, 3 Ind, 1 Con

The Conservatives came within 111 votes of being wiped off Wigan council last year, in its all-out elections. This wasn't especially to do with a big collapse in their vote: there was just a 1% swing to Labour, whose vote was down four points. Rather, it was about inherent Conservative weakness in this huge and almost uniformly hostile borough.

The Tories held one seat in **Lowton East** and **Standish with Langtree**, of which the Lowton East councillor is up for election this year.

Lowton East: the south-western end of the Leigh constituency, had been a fairly strongly Conservative ward but Labour had made big strides in recent years: 28% in 2019, 38% in 2021, 47% in 2022 and 51% in 2023. This was a straight two party fight which seems to have helped Labour: in earlier years where others have stood here their votes seem to have come entirely from the Labour bloc.

Standish with Langtree: the rural ward north of Wigan, is weaker for both parties: there has been an independent

challenge here for years and they routinely poll around 20%. One of the Labour councillors is up first this year and this will be a battle royal because the majority Labour is defending is just two votes.

The Conservatives can usually do a bit better than this, even in Wigan, though not much better. Their top shot in a ward they lost all three seats in is **Orrell**, which they missed out on by just 51 votes last year.

When Labour is in government, the Conservatives might have a shot at **Wigan Central** and maybe **Astley**, on the edge of Worsley, but they weren't close enough to have any expectations in either this year.

Because the other parties are so weak in Wigan independents and organised residents groups have filled the gap somewhat. Independents won two wards outright, at either end of the district: **Atherton North** and **Bryn with Ashton-in-Makerfield North**.

These two are pretty secure. Then there were three wards in which they won one seat, either side of Atherton: **Ince, Hindley Green** and **Tyldesley and Mosley Common**. Of these, the independent seat is only up in Tyldesley.

This one may be quite difficult to hold: the independent came more than 300 votes (12%)

behind the two Labour councillors and it appears there may have been a racial aspect to the one Labour loss: their defeated candidate was called Farai Nhakaniso.

It'll also be difficult for independents to gain another seat in Hindley Green: the majority of the Labour councillor up here is 450. It seems the independent who won here last year had a huge personal vote, topping the poll. Only one independent stood in Ince last year so the Labour candidate here doesn't actually have a majority to measure against.

There are three other potential targets for independents. They were 199 votes behind in **Hindley** ward and 256 behind in **Ashton-in-Makerfield South**.

They were 280 short in **Shevington with Lower Ground and Moor** and 306 shy in **Atherton South and Lilford**.

Labour has been as damaged by Brexit as the cultural divide it exposed in Wigan as it has in other strongly Leave districts. In the 1996 local elections, Labour polled 75% of the vote; in 2023 48%. Some of that 27-point decline has moved to the Conservatives but most has gone to independents. But this is a measure of how strongly Labour Wigan district is - that they can lose that degree of vote share and still win every seat.

Winchester

Current council

30 LD, 12 Con, 2 Grn, 1 Ind

Seats up

7 LD, 7 Con

Winchester - this district is slightly misnamed because it is a massive geographic entity covering Mid Hampshire - has been a Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground since the mid 1980s.

At the moment it's not really a battleground at all: the Lib Dems have a commanding lead of 2:1 over all other parties. Last year thirteen Lib Dem councillors to just two Conservatives and one Green.

Traditionally this has been a battle between the five city of Winchester wards that typically elect a full- or near-full slate of Lib Dems, and the rural extent of the district where the Tories racked up the votes.

Again, Brexit has been the cause of the Conservatives' woes. The party held 25 seats in 2016, six weeks before the EU referendum. Today they hold just twelve and they'll emerge with fewer after May 2nd.

The Conservative vote hasn't collapsed all that much: they're down about eight points on their pre-referendum typical shares, which isn't insignificant but nor is it completely ruinous.

Instead, Labour's vote has collapsed to between 5% and 10% - among their poorest showings anywhere.

Of the seven Conservative seats up for election this year they will struggle to hold five: Alresford and Itchen Valley, Badger Farm and Oliver's Battery, Bishop's Waltham and St Luke (their last seat within the city itself), plus Central Meon Valley where the Greens hold the other two seats.

None of these wards was close last year - the Greens in Central Meon Valley, for example, polled 2,168 to the Tories' 889.

If anything, the Conservatives need to watch one of the two wards they held last year: Denmead, where they were just 81 votes ahead of the Lib Dems.

Only Wonston and Micheldever looks remotely safe and, even here, there was a 9% swing to the Lib Dems.

There is very little a party can do when voters no longer choose to vote for it. This is not about a lack of activists door-knocking, an inept polling day operation or any other organisational failure: Winchester residents simply do not want to vote Conservative in sufficient numbers for them to be competitive at the moment.

The consolation is that this place has swung from them

before, and then swung back even more strongly. Until it does again the Tories will just have to weather this latest, heavy, storm.

Woking

Current council

20 LD, 4 Con, 2 Lab, 5 Ind

Seats up

5 LD, 4 Con, 1 Lab

Other than Thurrock, the other council in financial crisis due to very poor choices is Woking.

Woking has for some years been competitive between the Tories and Lib Dems at local level. But not any more: the Conservatives are likely to be wiped off the council in May.

Woking's woes stem from poor real estate investment. Building a property portfolio might look like an attractive angle to boost council income when interest rates are low, but it was the assumption they would never rise that undid Woking.

The council now has a deficit of £1.2 billion, with a projection that it will balloon to £2.6 billion. That would create a funding problem for a big local authority let alone tiny Woking.

The council has an annual budget of about £16 million. Debt interest repayments stand at about £64 million a year.

The political consequence of this catastrophic investment strategy has been to obliterate the Conservatives (on whose watch the decisions were made). Other than seats in **Byfleet and West Byfleet** and the oddly drawn Labour ward of Canalside, the Lib Dems won everything last year.

Their vote has swelled from 17.5% in 2015, 29.9% in 2019, 36.1% in 2021, 47.4% in 2022 and 50.1% in 2023. They outpolled the Tories by more than 2:1 last year.

The only vaguely close ward was **Knaphill**, and then only because independents compete strongly here: they won in 2022.

This year the Tories are defending their final seats in **Heathlands**, **Knaphill** and **Pyrford**, plus the only one they've held for years in **Byfleet** and **West Byfleet**.

Most of the top councillors and officers responsible for the epic mismanagement have moved on leaving behind them a financial mess for the electors and a seemingly fatal mess for the Conservatives.

Wokingham

Current council

26 LD, 22 Con, 5 Lab, 1 Ind

Seats up

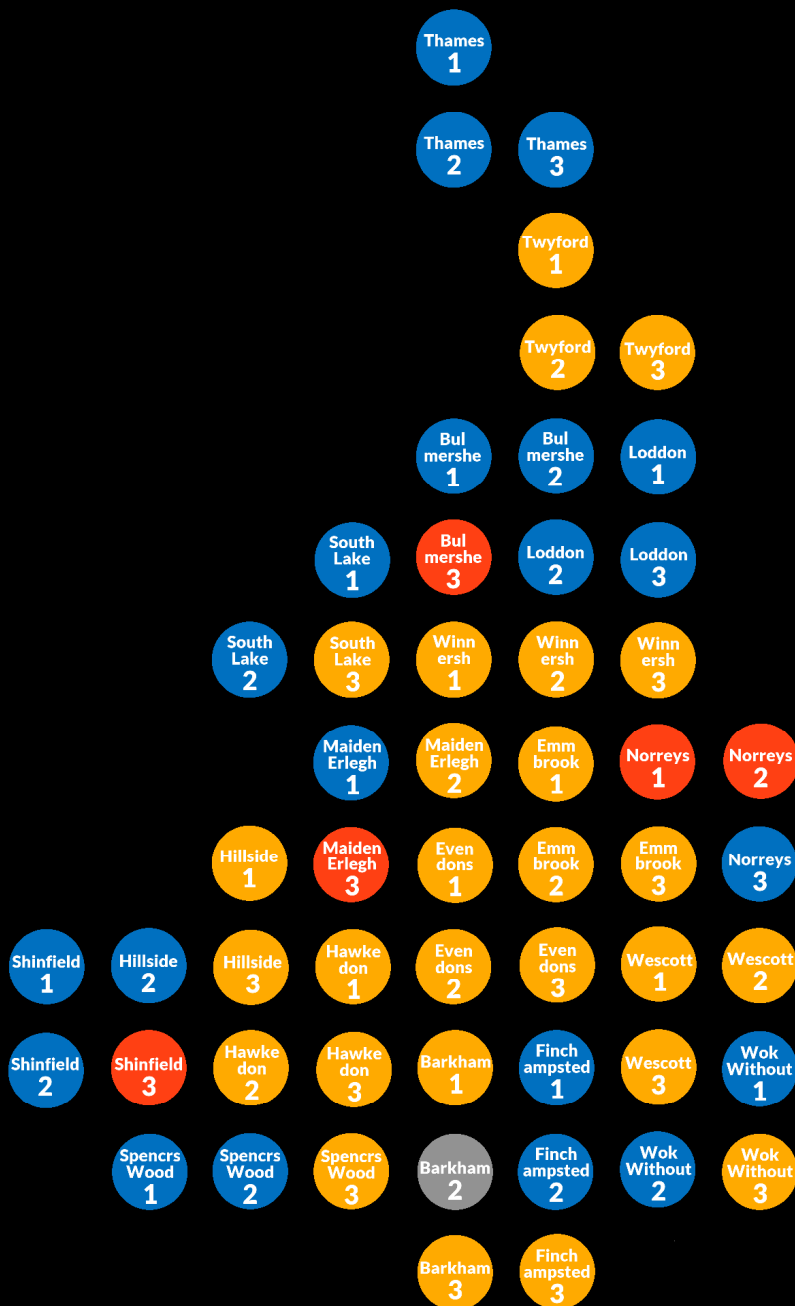
All - boundary changes

Even during the Conservative collapse in the run-up to the 1997 general election, they were only denied a majority in Wokingham for a year (1996-1997). This time they've already been out of power for two years and it'd be a little surprising if they regain it.

The whole council is up for re-election and the wards have been heavily redrawn, so anything's possible - but probably not if the Tories can't poll above 40% district wide. In fact there's an easier path to a majority for the Lib Dems as long as they can repeat their showing of 2023.

This is another council where the Local Government Boundary Commission has cast aside a mesh of one- two- and three-councillor wards for a uniform pattern of three-member divisions.

There may only be nine seats - three wards - the Conservatives can depend on, all in the north of the district. There is the awkwardly drawn far northern ward now called Thames, which includes much of Remenham, Wargrave and Rusper and now extends to include Sonning.



There is Loddon, the east end of the town of Woodley. Finally, Spencer Wood and Swallowfield should just about manage to return three Tory councillors.

The Conservatives should also be favoured to win the amalgamated Bulmershe and Coronation. This is a clash between Labour Bulmershe and Tory Coronation, but Bulmershe has been split and Coronation was more Tory than Bulmershe was Labour.

Barkham and Arborfield merges a ward the Lib Dems won in 2023 (Barkham) with one they didn't contest in 2022 (Arborfield) allowing an independent to defeat the Tory. But the Lib Dems will have to contest this combined ward in order to defend their seat. What the implications for the independent will be in that scenario is anyone's guess but a divided non-Conservative vote could return one of each: Con, LD, Ind.

The Liberal Democrats start as firm favourites in as many as seven wards for 21 secure enough seats. They have three wards in Wokingham itself: Emmbrook, Evendons and Wescott.

Winnersh will also vote Lib Dem, and that commuter town links Wokingham with the other source of Lib Dem strength at the moment: Maiden Erlegh.

Here they can expect to win Hawkedon and Hillside.

The Lib Dems should be favourites in Twyford, Ruscombe and Hurst. The latter two places are currently in Tory wards but are small, whilst Twyford is both larger and very strongly Lib Dem (84% last year). This ward could be closer than I expect, in which case it might split.

The reverse is true in South Lake: the south end of Woodley. This one is slightly odd in that the Lib Dems won the seat up in 2022 - a slightly better year for the Tories, but the Conservatives won the seat up in 2023, pretty easily too. Hence, let's rate this one as leans Tory, but it could split given the Lib Dem councillor may have a decent personal vote.

Labour is a little hard done by in this review. They have two wards right now: Bulmershe and Whitegates, which is part of the Reading East constituency, and Wokingham town's Norreys. Norreys is barely altered, but it's very marginal, while Bulmershe has been divided. with Whitegates going in with Maiden Erlegh and Bulmershe merging with Coronation.

Maiden Erlegh ward is a Lib Dem Conservative marginal where Labour is distant. That means that the new Maiden Erlegh and Whitegates should

be a three way marginal with Labour in third. Labour could therefore end up in a range of zero seats to perhaps four or five.

The outcome in the remainder of the wards depends exactly on how poorly the Conservatives do.

For example, Wokingham Without should be reliably Tory. They had never lost it...until they did last year, by nearly 400. This is a must-win for the Tories on their road to rebuilding a majority in Wokingham district.

There is also the new Finchampstead ward, which almost perfectly amalgamates Finchampstead North and Finchampstead South. The former is comfortably Conservative; the latter went Lib Dem the last time it was contested in 2022 (but the second seat here is still Tory).

Crudely totting up the party votes in both wards from 2022 gives Conservatives 1,757 and Lib Dems 1,723. Again though, this is a must-win for the Conservatives.

Even more difficult to predict is another fusion of two segments of the town of Shinfield, tucked just below Reading.

Labour won the single-member Shinfield North last year but, as with Maiden Erlegh, the southern Shinfield ward is a

Conservative-Lib Dem marginal. Shinfield South is also much bigger: a 3 councillor ward, so its preferences are likely to win out, though a chunk of it is moving into the new Spencers Wood and Swallowfield.

Repeating the back-of-an-envelope calculations just done for Finchampstead, the Conservatives polled 1,320 across the two divisions last year, the Lib Dems 1,092 and Labour 765.

All told, the Conservatives seem on course for twenty seats or so. Labour cannot be guaranteed anything but lets say the national political climate will help them to four seats. Independents could win one or two. That leaves one potential independent and 26 or so Lib Dems.

But so fine are the margins in several of these new wards that there is a wider range of outcomes, from a narrow Lib Dem majority to the Tories winning slightly more seats in a still hung council.

Wolverhampton

Current council 47 Lab, 13 Con
Seats up 15 Lab, 5 Con

Wolverhampton is fairly similar to neighbouring Walsall to its east. It has a large amount of

council housing. It has a large ethnically diverse electorate. It has affluent semi-rural suburbs. Yet Wolverhampton is a pretty safe, long-term Labour city, while Walsall has been anything but. What's the difference.

The answer is in the last sentence. Wolverhampton is a city, Walsall is not. And Labour is emphatically stronger in cities - even Leave-voting cities, like this - than other types of council. The larger the city, the stronger Labour tends to be.

In part this is because cities tend to have a cohesive identity. Walsall is a place in its own right but Aldridge and Brownhills and Willenhall and Darlaston are not Walsall: they're just separate neighbourhoods attached. The same is true of councils like Dudley and Solihull.

There are other reasons why cities tend to be more inclined to Labour. It is far easier for parties to organise in cities, and because Labour is stronger there they have larger activist bases. Cities tend to have higher proportions of professionals and those with academic qualifications; and - perhaps - better integrated minority ethnic communities.

There is one other big difference between Walsall and Wolverhampton: Labour has administered this city without much controversy or the zany

policy ideas of the left in Walsall.

Wolverhampton is organised something like a clock, or a bike wheel, with its wards like spokes radiating out from the central St Peter's ward.

A good measure of how well the Conservatives are doing in Wolverhampton is how many wards on the western side of the city they can win.

They have two safe wards: **Tettenhall Regis** and **Tettenhall Wightwick**. Then there was **Bushbury North** (the 12 o'clock ward) in which they won all three seats, but narrowly. And then two split wards: **Merry Hill** and **Penn** at 7 and 8 on the clock face. Because of how these wards split last year in all-out elections, it is one of the Tory councillors up first this year.

Then there are the wards the Conservatives missed, by increasing margins: **Oxley** (9.9%), **Wednesfield South** (13.7%), **Ettingshall South and Spring Vale** (14.4%), **Fallings Park** (15.3%), and **Wednesfield North** (18.0%).

The Tories haven't come close to a haul of that size for years (the end years of the last Labour government) despite having to have won them when gaining the two parliamentary constituencies of South West and North East in 2019.

Part of the reason for those wins was differential turnout - much stronger enthusiasm to vote among the smaller number of Conservative supporters compared to the larger Labour contingent alienated by Corbynite politics. In local elections apathy levels the playing field considerably, and the Tories will do well to hold what they have.

Worcester

Current council

13 Lab, 11 Grn, 7 Con, 4 LD

Seats up

All - boundary changes

Other than Bristol, Worcester could well be a Labour vs Green battle for a majority on a council from which the Conservatives could be eradicated.

The Green advance in Worcester has been rapid. They won their first seat in 2012 in St Stephen's ward. In 2016 they added a second, Battenhall, and from there it's been steady progress to a group of eleven.

Nearly all of these gains have come from the Conservatives in outlying suburban wards. But they also hold Arboretum, an inner formerly Labour ward.

While the Green challenge can in large part come from supplanting the Conservatives,

to challenge Labour for power on the council they need to win a few more inner city seats. They would also be aided by a slightly stronger Conservative performance than last year when the Tories lost every Worcester seat up for election. That's never happened before: not even in the run-up to 1997.

The Conservatives can feel a little sore at last year's result. Yes they plumbed the depths, polling just 25.5% (down from 31% in 2022 and 39% in 2021) but Labour also tanked, polling just 28.2%. 28% won Labour four seats, 26% nothing for the Conservatives.

But Labour remained fairly strong in its core wards while the Tories were picked off by different foes in theirs: Lib Dems in the north, Greens around the rim, Labour in usually safely Tory Battenhall.

Last year's result was somewhat remarkable: no party won more than 30% of the vote. The Greens narrowly polled the most votes: 28.8% - another first for this western city.

Based on last year's showing, Labour might be expected to win sixteen seats, the Greens twelve, the Lib Dems five and the Tories two.

Those last two are, of course, questionable as, in reality the Tories won nil seats last year. However, the south-western

most ward, Battenhall, which was always Conservative until last year has been split, with a chunk merging with the eastern end of St John's ward.

This new ward: Dines Green and Grove Farm looks to inexperienced eyes as though it contains more Labour votes than the majority left behind in Lower Wick and Pitmaston - the successor to Bedwardine. Labour led by 146 votes in Bedwardine last year. I think Lower Wick and Pitmaston would have - very narrowly - stayed Conservative.

Of course, if Labour can win both wards that have been carved out of Bedwardine they should win a majority of one, provided they don't lose anything to the Greens (or, less likely, Lib Dems or Tories).

Labour needs to watch the new Warndon and Ebury Park ward, which fuses Labour-voting Warndon with Conservative-voting Gorse Hill. Gorse Hill is slightly more strongly Tory than Warndon is Labour so the ward could split.

The Tories are also still competitive in Nunnery ward but this usually votes Labour and the Tories probably can't win here until they're in opposition nationally.

There is also the new Fort Royal ward, which has been carved from the central, straggly, Cathedral ward. The Tories have occasionally won seats in

Cathedral, though it leans Labour. Fort Royal takes the territory on the eastern bank of the Severn, which may be somewhat better for the Tories. So either a close result could emerge here or I'm completely wrong about its potential!

Whether the Conservatives manage to win one or two seats by the skin of their teeth or fail, 2024 is likely to be their worst result in Worcester ever. But I wrote earlier that, for the Greens to win a majority they need to break into two or three Labour-held wards.

It's not obvious which these may be: there were no close Labour-Green contests in 2023 or 2022.

That's not to say the Greens cannot pull off a spectacular - coming from virtually nowhere to win. It's just that in the last few years the vast majority of these impressive Green Party results have come in Conservative held wards, not Labour.

That said, with Labour also mired with very poor vote shares, these are optimal circumstances for the Greens to break through.

Worthing

Current council

24 Lab, 11 Con, 1 LD, 1 Grn

Seats up

6 Lab, 6 Con, 1 LD

The council that has swung furthest, fastest to Labour in recent years is Worthing.

In 2016 Labour had no councillors here. Then in successive elections they won 5, 10, 15, 19 and 24 seats, winning a majority in 2022.

Labour has almost reached its apex in Worthing. The 2021 set of results were part of their rapid surge but there are a couple more Conservative seats they can pick off from that set this year: **Castle** and **Northbrook**.

They'll also be after the last Lib Dem seat on the council in **Tarring**, where they hold the other two seats.

The Liberal Democrats are the historic recipients of the non-Conservative vote in Worthing: they ran the council in the late 1990s. But just as in next-door Adur to the east, Liberal Democracy has withered on this stretch of the south coast.

The Greens also won a foothold on the council last year, taking a seat in **Goring** ward. Their win was pretty comfortable: a 493 vote majority making the Tory

defence of their seat here very difficult, to put it mildly.

The Conservatives' big problem is that, in 2021, they defeated Labour by ten percentage points across Worthing: 45% to 35%. Last year Labour led 46% to 31% - a 12.5% swing between the comparative years.

As an aside, for the Tories to lead Labour by that much four years ago and still only come away level in seats suggests they are distributing their vote very poorly.

Look for the post election situation on this council to be something like Labour 27, Conservatives 8, Greens 2.