



The Southfields by-election: Thursday 29 March 2012

Analysis and narrative of the results

Introduction

The Southfields by-election was the second by-election in Wandsworth borough and Putney constituency since the 2010 all-out council elections, following Thamesfield on 30th June 2011.

Caused by the resignation of Conservative councillor Lucy Allan, Southfields has been a securely Conservative ward – in council elections at least – since Labour lost two seats in by-elections in the 1974-1978 council term.

Southfields is a long ward stretching from Wandsworth town centre in the north down to the borough boundary with Merton in the south and, more or less, the District Line in the west to the river Wandle in the east.

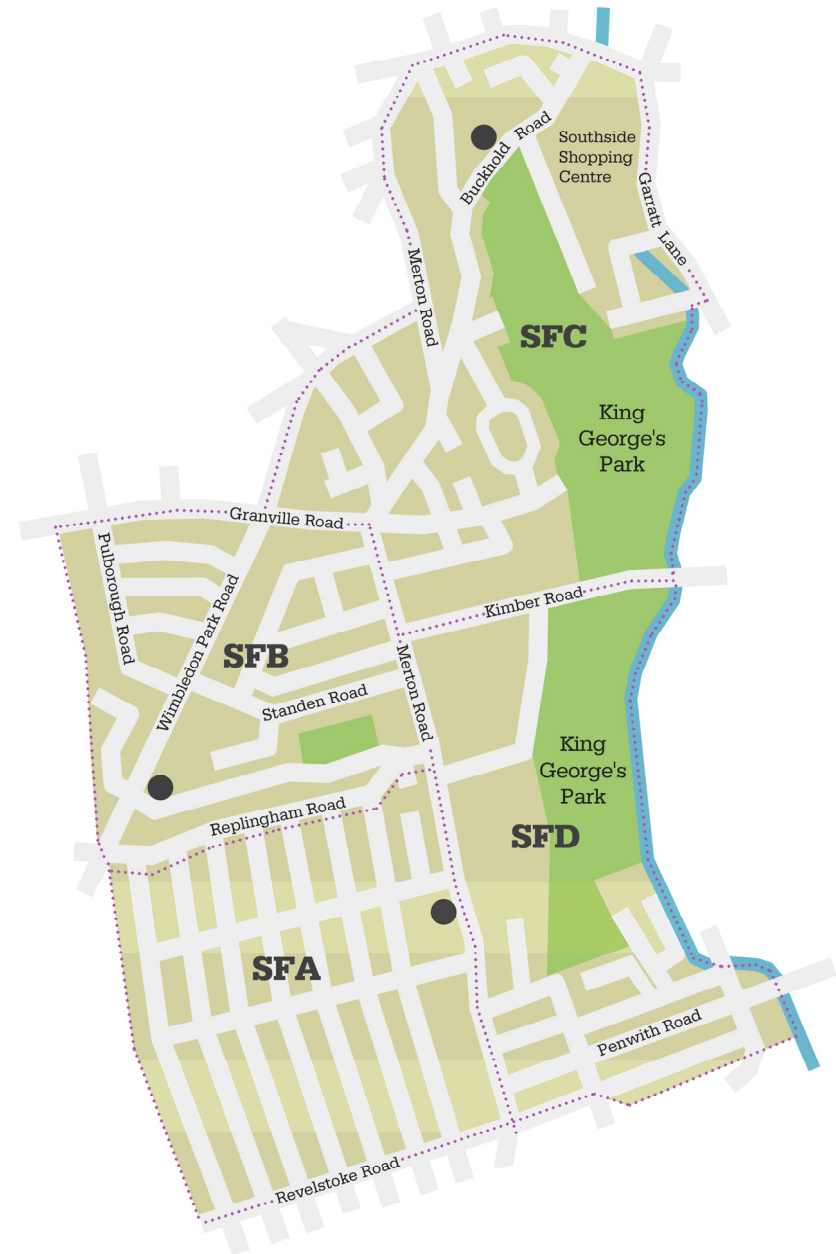
The ward is split into four distinct polling districts:

SFA, with an electorate of almost exactly 4,000, covers the Southfields Grid: a densely-populated square of affluent residential streets south east of Southfields tube

SFB - Southfields proper – the area north east of Southfields tube centred on Wimbledon Park Road

SFC: The Wandsworth section of the ward north of Granville Road, including most of the council housing in the ward – in particular the Arndale estate above Southside Shopping Centre. But it is also where most of the new build housing is being constructed: Hardwick's Square, Palladio Court, Cockpen House and Broomhill Road. These are lower turnout but they are not especially strong for Labour.

SFD: The far south-eastern corner of the ward parts of which are closer to Earlsfield than Southfields



Ward political characteristics

- A significant Labour promise which we have traditionally struggled to turn into a Labour vote
- A large ward with no uniform identity – large chunks do not identify themselves as “Southfields” – particularly the northern section which is identifiably Wandsworth town
- As a result, no universal issues: a key distinction between Southfields and last year’s Thamesfield by-election
- Ward still gentrifying – especially the terraced streets in middle of the ward and the new housing developments in the far north

The Conservatives are strongest in the south and west of the ward; Labour in the north and east. However, that statement needs to be qualified: although SFA is the most strongly Conservative district, because of its electorate size and higher turnout than the north of the ward, Labour usually gets more actual votes here than in SFC. In fact, we can make this forecast: until Labour gets more votes in SFC than SFA the party will not win Southfields. But this is achievable.

Electoral history

Southfields has always leaned Conservatives: the most Labour ever won here, in their 1971 borough landslide, was by 14 points; that being the only election Labour ever polled more than half the vote here. But while the Conservative vote has stayed very stable in Southfields; around 50% consistently since the mid 1970s, Labour’s performance had, until this by-election, been characterised by clear, declining, shelves of support:

- From the creation of the borough in 1964 to 1974, Labour averaged 44% of the vote
- From the 1975 by-election right through until 1994, Labour averaged just over 35% - and like the Conservatives, that vote was stable

- From 1998 through to 2010, Labour support crashed to an average of just 21%, including a third-place in 2006. This coincided with a) stronger support for minor parties and b) significantly lower voter turnout

What makes Southfields unusual is that constancy of Conservative Party support: this ward has not seen their support grow: indeed, if anything it is weaker now than it was in the 1970s; it has been the ebb and flow of Labour’s support that has been principally responsible for swing here. When Labour has managed to unite the non-Tory vote behind it, elections have been close. When that vote has splintered the Conservatives have won comfortably.

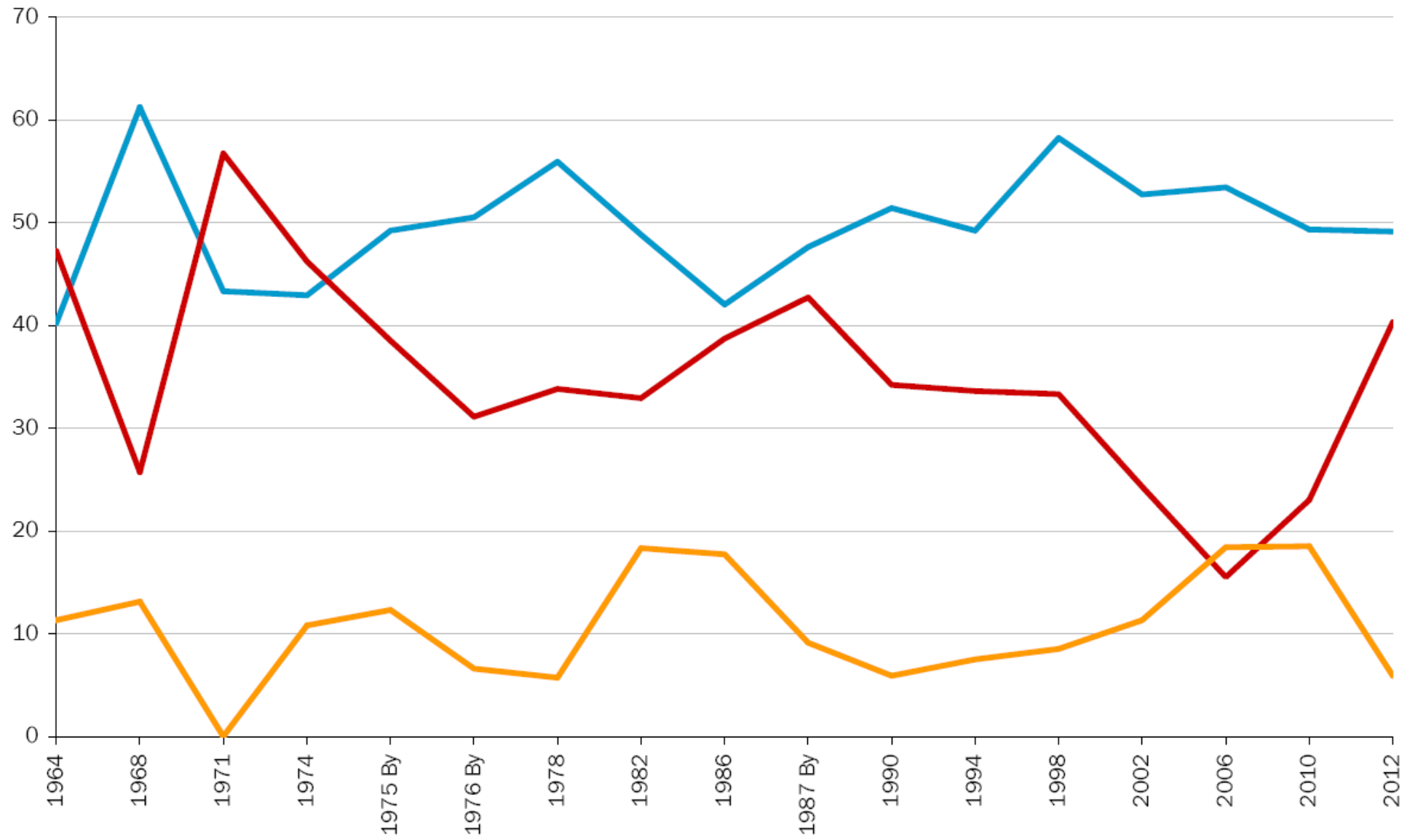
There is something of a mythology about the strength of the Liberal Democrats in Southfields. They finished second here in 2006 because Labour did badly: because Labour regained second placed it was assumed the Lib Dem threat had been dispensed with but in fact they polled a higher share of the vote (and, because of the much higher general election turnout, many hundreds more votes) in 2010 than 2006.

Southfields does have some latent centre vote: the party historically has polled between 10 and 20% but the 18.7% it managed in 2010 is its highest ever share.

There is no particular history of Green support in this ward: there were only three wards in 2010 that the Greens scored a lower share of the vote (though that in part may have been down to Greens voting tactically Lib Dem due to the higher Lib Dem visibility here).

There have been independent challenges in the past. June Hautot stood here in 2002 as a “Save Our Services candidate, ostensibly to defeat former Tory Social Services chair Jan Leigh – she served only to drain support from Labour. In 2006 and 2010, local pensioner Ted Larkin has stood here – he has a long history of contesting council elections in the ward he lives in but he had moved to a care home by the by-election.

The electoral history of Southfields ward: 1964-2012



The result

Candidate	2012 by-election			2010 council election			Party
		30.6	-34.5		65.1		
Kim Caddy	1,841	49.1	-0.3	4,101	49.3		Con
Josh Kaile	1,511	40.3	+17.3	3,952			Con
John Munro	220	5.9	-12.6	3,842			Con
Bruce Mackenzie	100	2.7	-4.9	1,922	23.0		Lab
Strachan McDonald	40	1.1	-	1,877			Lab
Choudry Abid	38	1.0	-	1,748			Lab
				1,607	18.5		LD
				1,557			LD
				1,290			LD
				610	7.6		Green
				135	1.7		Ind
Con to Lab swing: 9.0		C maj	330	8.8	C maj	2,116	26.3
LD to Lab swing: 15.0							

Throughout the postal vote openings and on election night we conducted detailed sampling of the votes cast. Overall we sampled 39.6% of all votes cast – and, once ballot box by ballot box total votes cast were added the sampling forecast the actual result to within two votes. So we can have a very high degree of confidence that the following figures are accurate.

Among those who cast their votes on polling day itself – excluding postal voters – Labour won the Southfields by-election: sampling shows we won 1,453 votes to the Conservatives' 1,153.

Josh won the SFC polling district massively: 60% to the Tories 32%. That included the second SFC box (Neville Gill Close and Sudbury House) which he

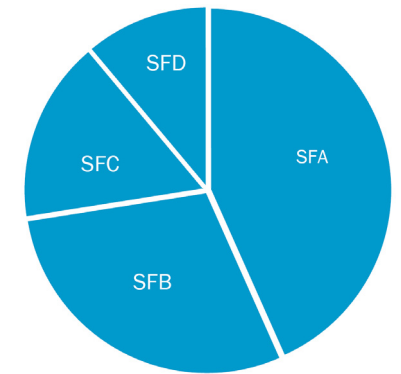
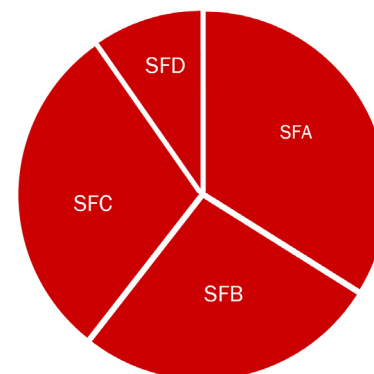
won with a thumping 70% of the vote. The Conservatives won SFA by 10 points. SFB and SFD went narrowly Tory but were, essentially, neck and neck.

Poll District	Total	Lab	Con	LD	Oths
SFA	973	397	499	50	27
		40.8	51.2	5.2	2.8
SFB	726	310	338	49	28
		42.7	46.6	6.8	3.9
SFC	584	348	188	21	27
		59.5	32.2	3.6	4.6
SFD	284	115	129	22	18
		40.6	45.3	7.8	6.3
Total*	2,567	1,171	1,153	143	100

*Excludes postal votes

Labour has a far more even spread of vote than the Conservatives. In SFA, B and C, we polled over 300 votes. Although SFC had a far higher percentage Labour vote, because of the vast size of the polling district and the higher propensity to turn out, SFA actually produced the most Labour voters.

In contrast, 43% of the total Tory vote in Southfields comes from the Grid. Almost three quarters of the Tory vote is in the SFA and SFB polling districts.



Postal votes

Of course, what Labour winning on the day means is that the Conservatives got their entire majority from postal votes. There were over 2,000 postal voters in the by-election, and approximately 61% of them voted. For every two votes cast in person in polling stations, one was cast by post.

Although our campaign added nearly 200 potential postal voters this result shows in terms categorical that postal votes are the number one issue Labour in Wandsworth has to address.

Total	Lab	Con	LD	Oths
1,188	370	716	47	55
	31.2	60.3	4.0	4.6

Turnout

In person turnout was lamentably low – almost exactly 25% - though somewhat higher than Thamesfield, partly because the Conservatives took this by-election a little more seriously. Two in every three votes cast were in SFA and SFB.

	Electorate*	Voted	% Voted
SFA	3,289	973	29.6
SFB	2,458	726	29.5
SFC	2,898	584	20.2
SFD	1,588	284	17.9
	10,233	2,567	25.1

* In person electors only – excluding postal votes

Had turnout in SFC and D matched SFA and B (and assuming votes would have been cast in the same proportions as sampled) Labour might have won 511 votes in SFC compared to the 348 we forecast we got.

But this does not follow: this report has been written before the marked register has been analysed but anecdotally, the areas that particularly were not turning out in SFC were the new build private housing developments: Argento Tower, Palladio Court, Hardwick's Square, Chapel Yard, Garratt Lane.

Differential turnout?

The reason Labour has done so well in both Thamesfield and Southfields has been the share of our 2010 vote we have held onto: 74% in Thamesfield, an even more impressive 82% in Southfields.

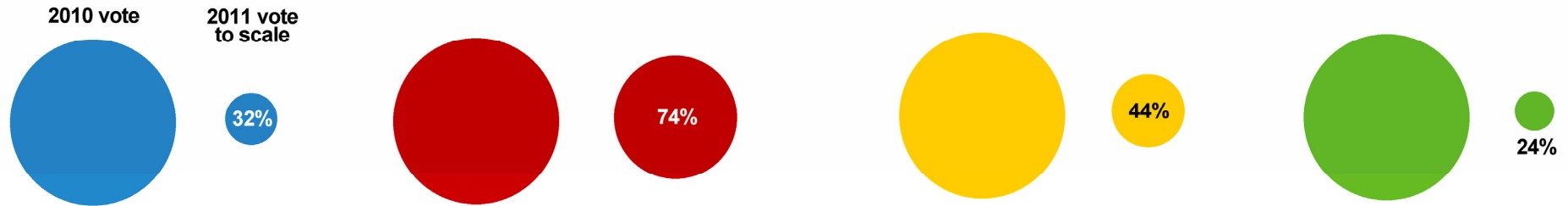
Likewise, the key difference between the results in Thamesfield and Southfields has been the different proportions of their votes the Lib Dems and Tories hung onto: especially the Lib Dems. In Thamesfield they held 44%: in Southfields fewer than 1 in 6 of those who voted Lib Dem in 2010 stayed with the party – in Thamesfield they retained better than 2 in 5 – and as turnout was similarly lower, that amounted to no change in their share.

In Thamesfield the Tories lost 2 in 3 of their massive 2010 vote of 5,000. But in Southfields they held almost half their lower 2010 vote of 4,000. The Greens have fared badly in both by-elections, as they have tended to in most council by-elections since the 2010 general election.

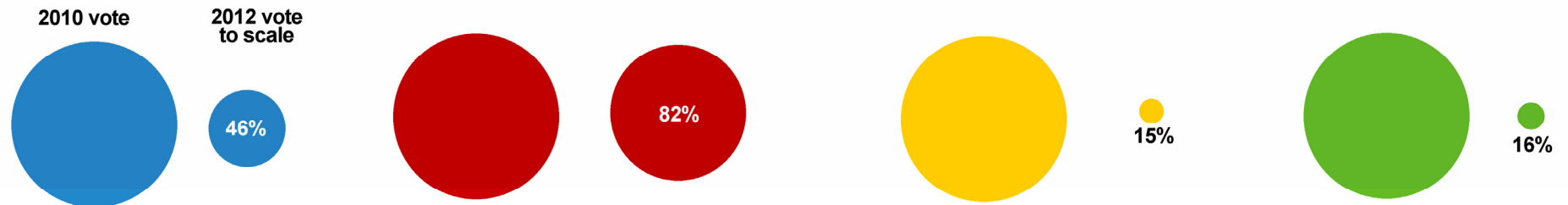
It has been argued that it is this factor: Tories and Lib Dems simply failing to get their vote out, is the reason Labour has done well. The reasons this argument is fallacious are threefold:

First, differential turnout is always a dubious claim – when council elections throughout the 1990s produced big swings to Labour the Tories often claimed that their supporters were simply sitting at home and, come the 1997 general election, they'd return. In fact, the council election results were

Thamesfield



Southfields



consistent with the Labour landslide. Likewise, in Labour's shockingly bad mid-term election defeats, it wasn't just that Tories were more energised to turn out and kick us: long-term Labour voters were switching.

Second, turnout in the by-election (30.5% - where we did well) was comparable with 2002 (31.8% - where we did badly) or even 2006 (35.9% - where we did very badly). There is no correlation - at all - between turnout and the strength of Labour's performance. Indeed, if you take far higher general election turnouts, Labour "won" Southfields in the 2001 general election by 12 points and lost by a (similar to this by-election) 7 points in the 2005 general election. This is a ward that swings.

Third is of course the anecdotal - but substantial - evidence we have through actually speaking to voters on the doorstep and over the phone that voters

were switching to us. In Thamesfield, Conservatives were coming across in droves. In Southfields, the Lib Dem vote did not just collapse: those previously identified Lib Dems we spoke to were switching to us.

That's not to say that the stay at home Tories were not significant in our advance: simply that 1) look at the marked register and you'll find PLENTY of Labour supporters who we did not turn out in the by-elections and 2) reassuring Conservatives that there was no reason for them to come out and actively vote AGAINST us was an important part of our strategy in both.

The differences between Southfields & Thamesfield

Labour's increase in vote share in Southfields was bigger than in Thamesfield. But the swing from Conservative to Labour was almost a third lower. Had the Thamesfield swing been replicated in Southfields we would have gained this seat.

The reason for this difference was that in Thamesfield it was Conservative votes we won; in Southfields it was (predominantly Lib Dem and Green votes). The resilience of the Conservative vote in Southfields is, second to the massive improvement in Labour's share, the big news from the by-election.

So what were the differences between the two by-elections and the two wards?

The first is that in Thamesfield there were big issues: overdevelopment, crime, High Street pollution which not only we could exploit but which we had been campaigning on consistently for years (since 2005 on improving the High Street for example). In Southfields, while overdevelopment was an issue, it had nowhere near the salience of Thamesfield; there were no other universal issues.

This is why the issue of candidate selection was so critical in Southfields – even more so than Thamesfield: our entire campaign was structured around the “Josh Kaile lives here” theme, partly because that does matter in a by-election but also because we had very little else ward-wide message.

Thamesfield was also a more cohesive ward: pretty much all of it regards itself as central Putney; as discussed above, Southfields is a conglomerate of very distinct and, outside Southfields proper, not especially large communities which within themselves are very different: the issues affecting the Arndale are – unless they concern King George's Park – not of interest to the Longstaffs, Morris Gardens or Avening Terrace.

The two wards are very different in terms of the nature of the party votes. In Thamesfield, beyond two medium sized council estates which have experienced large right-to-buy sell offs there is no such thing as a “core” vote, if that means ethnic minority, working class and council estate residing Labour supporters. In Southfields, there is a huge “core” vote but one ground down by neglect by the Tory council that is incredibly difficult to mobilise. We did better at turning it out in the by-election, in part because it received a lot more attention than can be afforded this ward in all-out council elections or general elections.

Likewise, the Conservative vote is different in the two wards. Generally in Thamesfield it is older, wealthier, more relaxed; in Southfields brasher, younger, more willing to regard endorsing a Conservative council as more important than arguments about a free vote, or wider choice. In other words, the Conservative vote in Thamesfield was more open to persuasion. We still won over Tory switchers, but their vote was much harder in Southfields.

And, although their vote was collapsing anyway, the decision of the Lib Dems not to seriously contest Southfields, contrasted with their active and outrageous campaign in Thamesfield, was critical to just how much their vote fell by in Southfields. What we have achieved through both campaigns, however, is – anecdotally – to make the Lib Dems look to a different part of the borough entirely for their next target ward: we understand it is going to be Southfields, whereas prior to Thamesfield it was going to be East Putney.

Clearly, being based in Thamesfield and having to “commute” to Southfields was a big difference: it was much easier to fire off a relatively small direct mail and get it out in Thamesfield than in Southfields. The volume of communications we got out in Southfields was significantly lower than Thamesfield, but that's again reflective of the fact we had far less to campaign on.

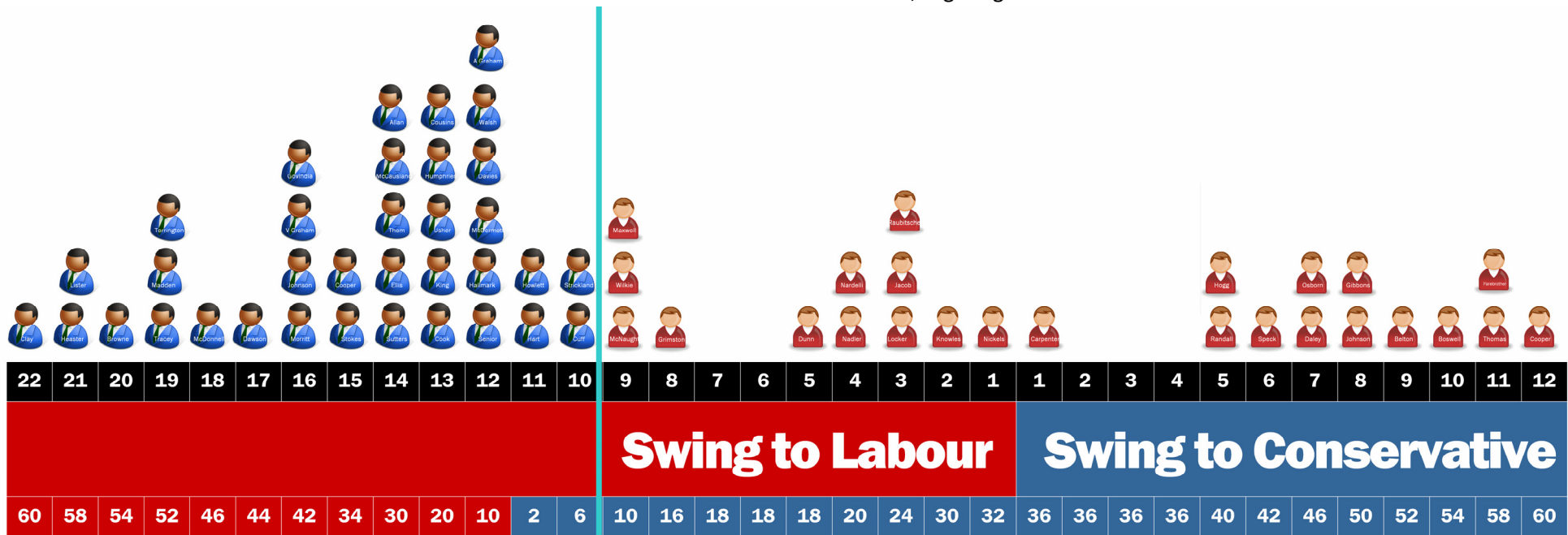
All that said Southfields should serve as a reality check for Labour in respect of the Conservative vote. Where the Conservatives work relatively hard, and where we do not have a local message to put to voters, the Conservative

vote is resilient, even in a by-election coming amidst economic stagnation, a very badly received Budget, big cuts locally and the unpopular NHS Bill becoming law. National issues played no evident part in this by-election and that's because voters are not stupid: they understand what things councillors are responsible for. They also, in affluent, middle class areas like Southfields, continue to appreciate the Conservative case, nationally and locally.

It is relatively easy to attract Lib Dem and Green votes – votes that could be characterised as to Labour's left, but there is no evidence that we are making inroads into the massively larger pool of Conservative-leaning voters who spent a decade voting Labour in general elections here but who are now firmly back in the Conservative fold.

By-election facts

- Fourth largest swing to Labour in any Wandsworth by-election (after Latchmere, 1981, Thamesfield 2012, St John 1980 and Roehampton 1980 – in three of those by-elections it was the Tory vote collapsing to the Alliance that created the swing: Thamesfield is the only genuine Conservative to Labour swing)
- Second biggest increase in Labour vote in any Wandsworth by-election (after Latchmere, 1981)
- Best Labour result in Southfields since the 1987 by-election
- If the Southfields swing was repeated borough-wide in 2014, Labour would win 25 council seats and the Conservatives 35. We would gain Roehampton, Queenstown and Bedford outright, and win seats in West Hill, Nightingale and Earlsfield.



Appendix 1: detailed box sampling analysis

Box	Area covered		Votes	% Votes
SFA 1	Astonville Street, Brookwood Road, Clonmore Street, Elborough Street, Elsenham Street, Engadine Street	Con	325	55.5
		Lab	213	36.3
		LD	32	5.5
		Others	16	2.7
SFA 2	Hamilton Mews, Hanford Close , Heythorp Street, Langton Place, Lavenham Road, Merton Road, Revelstoke Road, Trentham Street	Lab	184	47.7
		Con	174	44.9
		LD	18	4.7
		Others	11	2.8
SFB 3	Balvernie Grove, Bowman Mews, Crowthorne Close, Gatwick Road, Granville Road, Hambledon Road, Lainson Street, Longfield Street, Merton Road, Pirbright Road	Lab	192	47.6
		Con	173	42.9
		LD	22	5.4
		Others	16	4.1
SFB 4	Pulborough Road, Replingham Road, Smeaton Road, Standen Road, The Baulk, Wimbledon Park Road, Wincanton Road	Con	165	51.2
		Lab	118	36.6
		LD	27	8.5
		Others	12	3.7
SFC 5	Avening Road, Avening Terrace , Brathway Road, Broomhill Road, Buckhold Road, Camborne Road, Chapel Yard, Coliston Road, Downbury Mews, Garratt Lane , Granville Road, Hardwick's Square, Limes Gardens, Longstaff Crescent , Longstaff Road	Lab	154	50.0
		Con	135	43.8
		LD	12	3.8
		Others	8	2.5
SFC 6	Mapleton Road (inc Argento Tower, Mantle Court and Palladio Court), Merton Road, Morris Gardens , Neville Gill Close , Newton's Yard, Red Lion Square, Wandsworth High Street , West Hill Road, Wimbledon Park Road	Lab	194	70.2
		Con	53	19.3
		LD	10	3.5
		Others	19	7.0

There was just one ballot box for SFD, so please refer to the polling district analysis for the results from this box