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Local Elections

2023 Summary

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Local Elections 2023

The View from Westminster



by Matt Gillow
Senior Account Manager

Get in touch with Matt

The local elections have not spelt good news for the Conservative Party – but then, they were never going to.

For all intents and purposes, there is nothing in the national picture that will cause much shock as results come in throughout the day. The Conservative Party took an anticipated beating at the ballot box. Labour will be delighted, but conscious of a handful of warning signs. The Liberal Democrats did well across the South of England winning Maidenhead and Windsor – which is where their traditional base lies.

It's the projections of national vote share which give us a better indication of what the results could mean for a general election. Conservatives have been heartened in recent weeks by a narrowing of the polls – which many claim is evidence that Rishi Sunak's managerial, steady-as-she-goes style is winning back voters. With the Party at around 26% of the vote share – the worst local elections performance since 1995 – it will be hard to reconcile with the current narrative. Despite this, with the Labour Party around 35% - a huge chunk of their potential majority eaten up by a jubilant Liberal Democrats – some in Starmer's camp will be a little nervous that Conservative polling is not a resounding endorsement of Labour. Professor Sir John Curtice, when asked about the projected national vote share, suggested that the implied swing "might just be enough" for Labour.

Conservative MPs meanwhile, will be looking nervously over their shoulders as council leads in their constituencies melt away. In the coming months, they will be looking for vote winning

projects to entice voters back. Kelly Tolhurst MP blamed housing targets and councils being forced to build "really significant numbers of homes." Sir Charles Walker MP argued that the Conservatives were losing because they weren't building enough homes.

There will be serious Conservative soul searching. It was a poor showing in the 2019 local elections that eventually put paid to Theresa May's beleaguered premiership, and whilst it is highly unlikely that Sunak will be ousted, those never-far-away murmurs of discontent on Conservative backbenches are sure to grow. Sunak has already taken heat for his alleged absence during the campaign, and the Prime Minister has seemed to allow Conservative Party Chairman, Greg Hands MP, to take the wheel. That is not to take away from the fact that this is a cause for real celebration for the Labour Party. Mid-term losses for a governing party are to be expected, but the Labour Party has made significant strides in key target areas.

There will, of course, be the odd point of concern for Labour voters who worry that Starmer's team cannot win an outright majority. Hartlepool, for example, saw Labour gains – but barely half of the turnover to get back to their pre-2019 levels. With Sunak beginning to creep closer in the polls, and a full 18 months of electioneering still to come, it will be seats like Hartlepool that the Conservatives hope can give them some reprieve.

There will be debate in the coming days on what the locals really mean, how much credence you can place on local elections as a bellwether for the national mood, and more. Certainly, though, the starting gun has been fired in the race for Number 10.

Who won where, & why does it matter?



by Matt Gillow
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The local election results, still trickling in, will give us an idea of where the major parties will focus their efforts and how they will shape their campaigns going into a general election.

Whilst local elections provide a valuable bellwether for the national mood, they give us a crucial insight into what really matters on the doorstep. Much has been made of Plymouth, where the Labour Party won 15 out of 19 seats contested, and the so-called 'tree massacre.' Just a fortnight ago, the council ordered the felling of 110 trees to make room for a major redevelopment of the city centre. Fast forward to today, and polling station staff were picking out ballots with trees drawn on.

The story in Plymouth – of hyper local issues painting a national picture – stands in stark contrast to the narrative some Conservative MPs are peddling. One time Conservative leadership candidate, Rehman Chisti, who is an MP in the newly-Labour controlled council of Medway, argued that voters aren't buying the Government's stance on migration and small boat crossings. It is an interesting debate around the nature of local elections – you can feed into national rhetoric in any way you like – but if you aren't addressing local issues, you won't win seats. What the results do show us is where targets may be and which big-hitters could be vulnerable. Much has been made of the risk to Dominic Raab,

Ben Wallace and others – but Hertsmere, home to Deputy PM Oliver Dowden, saw 13 opposition gains and the Conservatives losing control of the council. In Bath & North East Somerset, Jacob Rees-Mogg's senses will be heightened – though he managed to ride out a local election landslide in 2019 with a huge majority, an increased Liberal Democrat hold on the council, coupled with the national picture, will cause concern. Across the country, Conservative MPs will be peering over their shoulders as they see the 'wipe-out' rhetoric solidified in their own back yards.

There are factors at play which, at the time of writing, are not yet clear. Voter turnout (particularly with new ID rules) will always be lower for local elections, and Conservative voters will have stayed home in droves due to the perceived lower stakes of the locals. The Conservatives are latching on to small pockets of hope – a strong showing in areas like Dudley, and gains in Peterborough, will make up much of the Party's 'this is not yet over' rhetoric as it seeks to keep the faith amongst activists. With commentators squabbling over the reasons for what was, undoubtedly, a terrible night in the polls – the Prime Minister must settle on an excuse and a solution quickly – or they risk a national picture which looks awfully like Aldershot – a Labour rout amongst an electorate historically Conservative.

View from the South West



by Matthew Bacon
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The South West has had a large number of councils up overnight with elections taking place throughout Devon, in large parts of Gloucestershire and the West of England. There are also elections in the key marginal councils of Swindon and further south in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP).

The story of the night at the time of writing here is one of Conservative setbacks at the expense of all opposition parties.

In terms of the traditional Labour vs Conservative battlegrounds, there have been two heavy losses to Labour in Swindon and Plymouth with the Conservatives losing the vast majority of councillors standing for election. The Tories may perhaps consider themselves fortunate for the fact that only one-third of the council was up for re-election in these two areas which avoided the complete collapse of their councillor base, in what are crucial general election marginal constituencies.

In the West of England, the Tories have also suffered significant setbacks, losing their flagship council of South Gloucestershire to no overall control. South Gloucestershire was lauded in 2019 for withstanding the rocky electoral tides but there was to be no such escape this time, with the party losing seats to both Labour and the Lib Dems.

In Bath and North East Somerset, the party has been reduced to a rump of three councillors in Jacob Rees-Mogg's backyard, with losses to a combination of parties and the Liberal Democrats commanding an overwhelming majority.

In North Somerset, this is one of the few areas in the region where the Tories have not gone backwards compared to 2019, but the council remains in no overall control with the opposition parties likely to maintain their rainbow coalition.

Gloucestershire has also provided gains for a collection of non-Conservative parties, with the Greens becoming the largest party in the Forest of Dean gaining nine extra seats. The Conservatives have also lost control of Tewkesbury Borough Council, where less than a decade ago, they controlled 33 out of a possible 38 seats. The Lib Dems also held control of Cotswold District Council comfortably, defeating the Conservative group leader in the process.

In Devon, the Conservatives have lost control in several of the remaining councils they had held onto in 2019. Losing South Hams to the Lib Dems and losing West Devon to no overall control. The story largely across the rest of Devon is a similar picture with the Conservatives losing to a collection of Lib Dems, Independents and Greens. One bright spot for the Tories is in Torbay, where the party has bucked the trend and gained the council which was previously under no overall control with a Lib Dem leader.

At the time of writing the Conservatives also appear to be on course for similar losses in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole where no overall control appears to be the most likely outcome, with a coalition led by the Lib Dems taking charge.

One thing is for certain, the results locally here will result in some very worried Conservative MP's and in the words of North Swindon Conservative MP Justin Tomlinson "No spin, no gloss. This is a dreadful set of results".

POLLING STATION

South West
Council
Deep Dives

Bath & North East Somerset Council

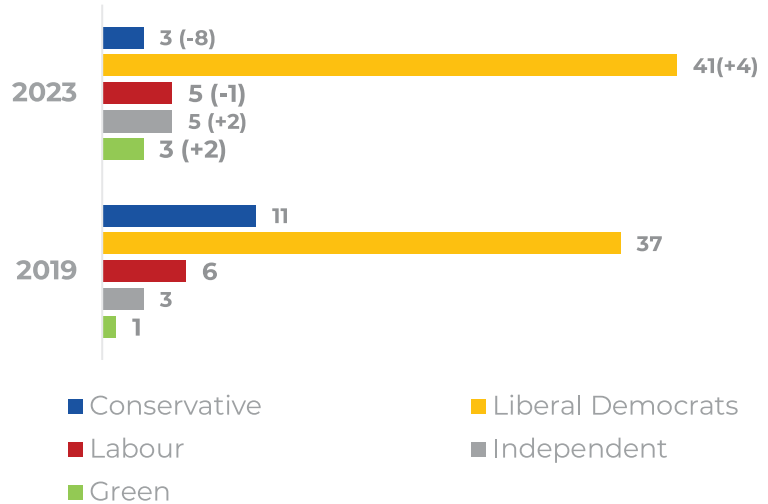
Bath & North East Somerset

Results May 2023*

Council Leader Elect

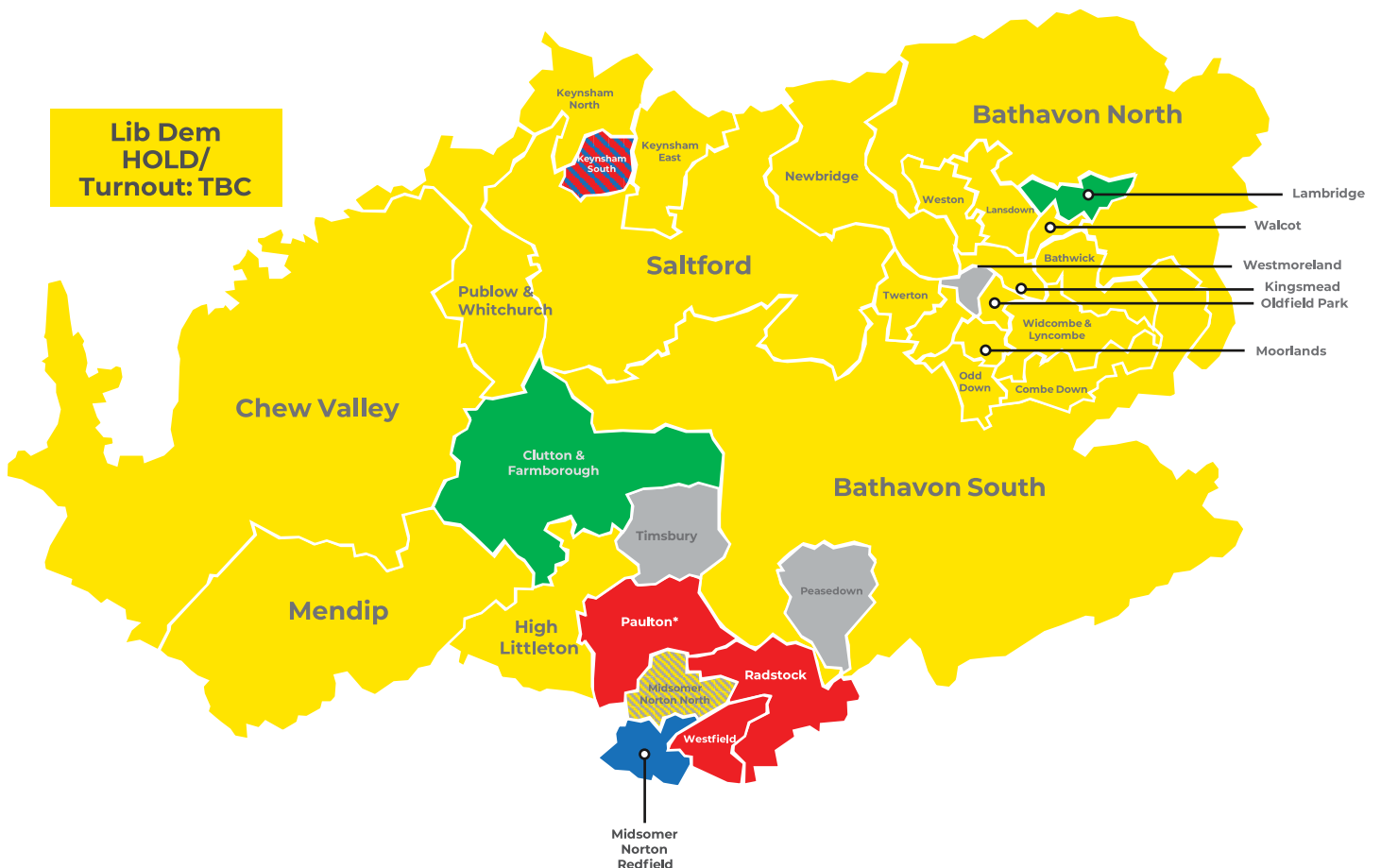


Cllr. Kevin Guy



The story of the Lib-Dem landslide

- **Few surprises as Lib-Dem grip strengthens;** For the first time since B&NES' formation a political group has hit the 40+ seat mark. Gains outside Bath, such as Chew Valley and Clutton and Farmborough, outweighed setbacks in Radstock and Lambridge.
- **Group Leader loses seat:** History repeats for the Tories for the second election in a row as their group leader lost their seat. But 2019 group leader Cllr Tim Warren CBE makes a surprise return in Midsomer Norton in an otherwise dreadful night for the Tories.
- **Little headway for Labour:** The group size stays essentially the same as 2019 with an almost certain gain to come in Paulton. A win here would mean Labour becoming the second-largest group for the first time since the 1999 election.



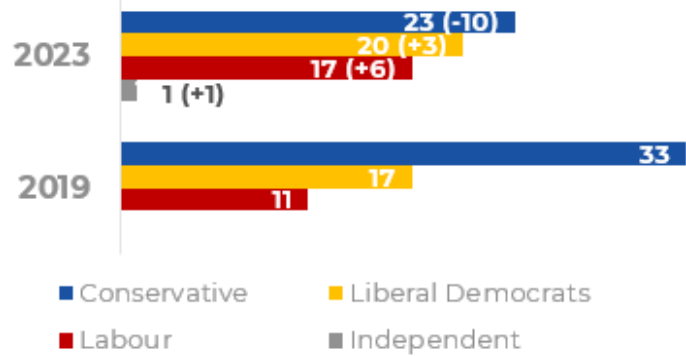
* = There is still one to be held in Paulton due to the death of the Green candidate, meaning a further two seats will be contested at a future date.



South Gloucestershire

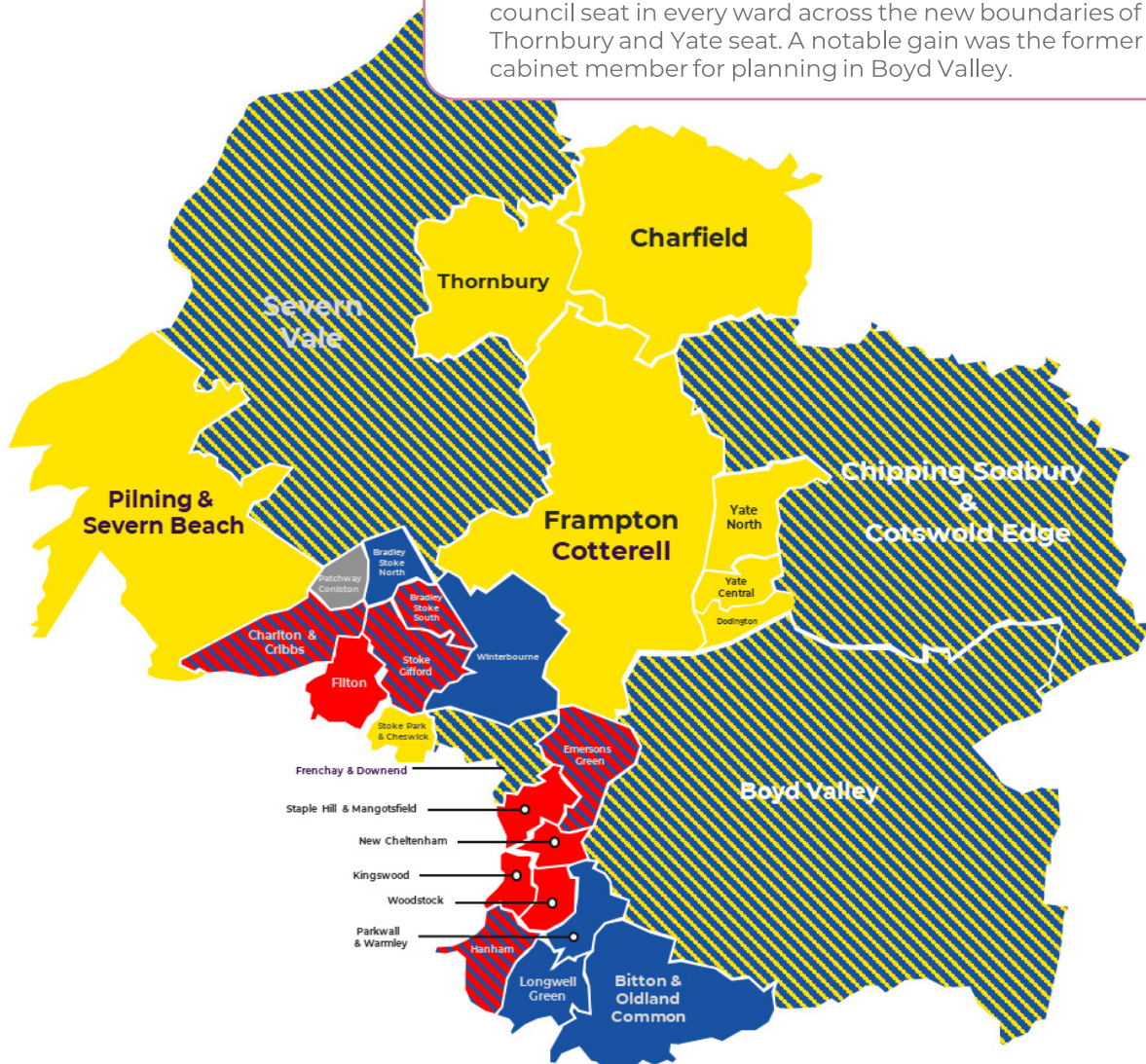
Results May 2023

Council Leader Elect TBC



Tories slip as Council becomes NOC

- **A story of split wards;** Despite an overnight count, ballots were still counted well into Friday morning due to the complication of voters splitting their votes across ballot papers for different candidates and parties. Some nine, mainly Tory wards, were decided this way and mainly accounted for the Council slipping to NOC.
- **Labour gain significant footholds;** The Filton & Bradley Stoke parliamentary seat will be a key battleground in 2024 – so Labour gaining seats in Bradley Stoke, Filton, Emersons Green, and Stoke Gifford gives hope of further success.
- **Boost for the Lib-Dems;** The party now has at least one council seat in every ward across the new boundaries of the Thornbury and Yate seat. A notable gain was the former Tory cabinet member for planning in Boyd Valley.





Plymouth

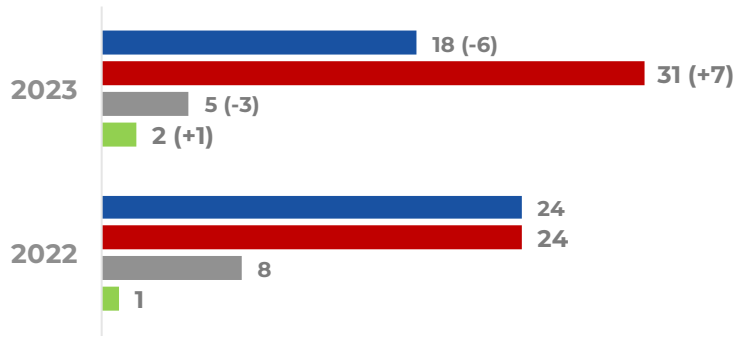
Results May 2023

(One-third of seats in the council contested – the map reflects the voting outcome at this election)

Council Leader Elect



Cllr. Tudor Evans



■ Conservative ■ Labour ■ Independent/other ■ Green

Council changes control with significant Tory losses

- **Stable majority?:** After years of regular political change, party infighting, and slim majorities, Labour now hold a solid working majority on Plymouth City Council, holding 31 seats compared to a combined 25 for opposition parties.
- **First-time gains:** Such was the scale of the Conservative defeat, Labour made gains in uncharted territory, including in suburban Plymstock Dunstone, comparable with the Blair local landslide in 1995.
- **Parliamentary consequences:** The Conservatives have lost every single ward in Johnny Mercer’s Plymouth Moor View constituency that he has held since 2015. This seat will be fiercely fought over at the next general election.
- **Note** – there is a one-seat vacancy on the Council.

Lab GAIN



About JBP

JBP is a full-service communications agency with the skills and experience to deliver results with strategic and innovative public affairs and public relations campaigns. We mix together the expertise of political advisors, communications specialists and digital engagement experts to ensure our campaigns are insightful and evidence backed.

At the core of our offer is detailed insight into the ever-changing world of local government, Westminster politics and Whitehall Government, with a hands-on approach to consultancy. Our network of experts spans the political spectrum, from local to national. Based in Westminster, with our Southwest office in the heart of Bristol, we understand politics, stakeholders, and communities. We are committed to working hard to deliver detailed and timely insight.

Our Westminster operation is supported by detailed local knowledge of the South West through our office in Bristol. This means our clients draw on the best of Westminster advocacy, campaigning and detailed local knowledge, in conjunction with an unrivalled ability to engage with the devolved administrations and business leaders at all levels.

At JBP, we aim to be your most trusted advisor and our advice will be an integral part of your decision-making process.

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