



2023 Local Elections

Sunak's first big test

Joshua Martin & Fionnuala Quinn



Introduction

The local elections across England on May 4 promise to be the first major electoral test for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak since he became party leader and a key indicator of whether the Conservatives can recover support to secure a fifth term in the next general election expected in 2024.

Polling suggests voters are set to punish the Conservatives despite Sunak's efforts to move on from Boris Johnson's scandal-plagued administration and Liz Truss' disastrously short premiership. With many key swing areas voting, Labour is keen to convert recent poll gains to electoral results and strengthen its claim to be a government-in-waiting. The Liberal Democrats and Greens are also looking to capitalise on Tory polling weakness.

Northern Ireland also holds local elections on May 18, where the lack of a power-sharing Stormont government for more than one year following disagreements about the post-Brexit arrangements has led to administrative stasis.

This Dods Political Intelligence report provides a preview of the local elections in England and Northern Ireland, including an overview of the top campaign issues, key electoral battlegrounds to watch, and a full list of candidates and seats that are due to be contested.



Party polling, cost of living and other key factors

Millions of voters outside of London will have the opportunity to pick representatives in some 230 metropolitan, unitary, and district councils which were last voted on in 2019. With more than 8,000 seats up for grabs, this represents the largest set of local elections of the parliamentary cycle. While local elections tend to be fought on area-specific concerns, from council tax bill levels to potholes and street lighting, nationwide issues including the cost-of-living crisis and recent political upheaval in the Conservative party are also expected to play an important part, and new voter identification rules could impact turnout. The results are expected to be announced through the night and into Friday May 5. The following are expected to be key factors in the elections:

Cost-of-living crisis

The cost-of-living crisis, driven by rising energy costs and higher inflation as the economy bounced back from Covid, has created a perfect storm for councils by simultaneously driving up operating costs and fuelling additional demand for support from hard-hit households. Reports suggest that has led many local authorities to cut spending on some of the services they provide their communities. These include education services, children's safeguarding and social care, adult social care, waste collection, planning and housing services, road maintenance, and library services. A [survey](#) of council leaders published in March by the Local Government Information Union (LGIU), a non-partisan local government membership organisation and think tank, found 90 percent of respondents said inflation was a problem for council finances, with some saying financial constraints could risk their capacity to deliver their statutory duties.

At the same time some local authorities have come under pressure to offer additional support such as food aid networks, energy advice schemes and Warm Hubs where people can drop in, warm up, and meet people, along with initiatives like the Household Support Fund, Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments. The cost-of-living crisis has also made it harder for councils to retain staff and exacerbated pay disputes which have led to strikes affecting services such as waste collection and recycling.

Council tax increases

Against that challenging backdrop, many councils have increased council tax to shore up their finances, thereby putting additional strain on tight household budgets. Reports suggest [more than half of local authorities plan to cut services and hike council tax](#) while some 12 English councils are close to running out of funds. [Research](#) by the County Council Network (CCN), England's biggest grouping of councils, found that even after raising council tax the largest councils would need to use reserves and make at least £1bn in savings to balance their 2023/24 budgets due to the financial pressures caused by inflation.

The government has increased the amount by which local councils in England are allowed to increase council tax without having to hold a local referendum, with those with social care duties able to hike by up to 5 percent and those without by up to 3 percent. Three councils have been given [special dispensation to deliver even larger increases](#). [Croydon](#) approved a 14.99 percent hike to help it recover from serious financial problems, while Thurrock and Slough councils plan to raise by 10 percent. Council tax is the main source of income for most councils, providing about half of local authorities' funding in England, according to the [Institute for Government think tank](#). Business rates and central government grants provide about a quarter of funding each. However, local authorities in England have seen considerable reductions in government grants since 2010.



Conservative party upheaval

Many of the councils up for election this cycle are in traditional Conservative voting small towns, suburbs, and rural districts, making the vote a key gauge of the public mood in areas that opposition parties will need to flip to defeat the Tories at the next general election. However, despite Sunak's best efforts to steady the ship since becoming Tory party leader in October, polls suggest the Conservatives have yet to recover support lost in the wake of the resignations of his predecessors Boris Johnson and Liz Truss last year. While Johnson's administration collapsed in scandal, Truss' record short stint as prime minister caused greater material impact on voters after her budget plans led to a spike in borrowing rates. And on April 21, less than a fortnight before the elections, Dominic Raab, the justice secretary and deputy prime minister and a key Sunak backer, resigned following an inquiry into allegations that he bullied staff.

National polls of voting intention showed the Conservatives at around 29 percent in mid-April, according to [Politico's Poll of Polls](#). Election experts Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher have estimated the Tories could shed [more than 1,000 seats](#). The BBC has reported that cabinet ministers [have been told](#) to make three campaign visits to target areas, but to privately prepare for a significant number of losses. By contrast, Labour was polling around 44 percent in mid-April, though off the highs seen in the wake of the ill-fated Truss mini-budget in October. That suggests Labour could win a considerable number of seats, particularly in Con-Lab battlegrounds that they failed to win over in 2019.

Comparisons with 2019

While polls suggest the Conservatives are facing heavy losses, their results may be flattered by comparisons with the last time these seats were contested in 2019 when the party was also experiencing a slump in the polls as Prime Minister Theresa May struggled to get a Brexit deal approved in parliament. The Conservatives lost a net 44 councils and 1,330 councillors, their heaviest local election defeat since 1995. The Conservatives may also benefit from the lower number of Eurosceptic candidates running compared with four years ago. Elections expert Sir John Curtice, a professor of politics from Strathclyde University, has [said](#) that the relatively light presence of Reform UK candidates on the ballot paper will leave Sunak hoping some leave voters will return to the Tory fold.

Labour failed to capitalise on the Tory polling weakness in 2019, losing a net six councils and 84 councillors as it faced its own internal struggles. With the Tories and Labour both suffering losses in 2019, it was the Liberal Democrats, Greens and independents who capitalised, gaining almost 1,500 councillors between them. It remains to be seen if those gains prove to be a high-water mark.

New voter ID requirements

This local election will be the first time that English voters will be required to present photo ID to cast their ballot in accordance with the [Elections Act 2022](#), something voters in Northern Ireland have needed to do since 2003.

The Electoral Commission has [launched a public awareness campaign](#) to prepare voters for the new requirement, which the Conservative party promised in its 2019 election manifesto and aims to prevent voter fraud. However, the ID requirement has received significant criticism and triggered warnings of increased risk of disenfranchisement, administrative delays and rejections at polling stations which could reduce voter turnout. In January 2023, [approximately two million voters](#) did not have the required ID.



New ward boundaries and devolution deals

Local government ward boundaries have been updated in 49 English councils to ensure that constituencies are a similar size. Areas that have seen changes include Derby, the Derbyshire Dales, Stoke-on-Trent, Stratford-on-Avon and Stockport, all of which are expected to be key battlegrounds.

The government's recent announcement of so-called devolution deals for Greater Manchester and West Midlands which grant them more control over some local policymaking could reflect well on the Conservatives though they have limited track record. The Government has said it plans to draw up devolution deals with "every part of England that wants one" by 2030.



Campaigns and Key Battlegrounds

Sunak kicked off the Conservative party's local election campaign on March 24 with a surprisingly low-key whistle-stop visit to the Black Country, accompanied by West Midlands Mayor Andy Street and local MPs, according to reports. The event escaped national press attention on the day and did not feature on the prime minister's or the Conservative party's Twitter accounts. In a short [article](#), the Express and Star regional newspaper reported that Sunak had said the Black Country was "the perfect place" to launch the campaign and the prime minister vowed to "fight for every vote". The Mirror wrote a report on what it called the "phantom election launch" a few days later, saying the Conservative party had not invited national media to the visit. The Express newspaper [reported](#) that the Conservatives had held their election campaign launch "without anyone noticing," and quoted Sunak saying, "Obviously, it's always challenging for a party that's been in power for a long time, but we're gonna fight really hard for every single seat everywhere." Party Chairman Greg Hands has since hit the campaign trail, tweeting on March 30 urging people to vote for the Conservatives for lower council tax and better value for money.

Labour leader Keir Starmer [launched the party's local election campaign](#) in Swindon on March 30 and challenged Sunak to freeze council tax for one year, though he would not commit to stopping council taxes from rising if Labour won the next general election. Many Labour-run councils are increasing council tax this year. The party has also launched a range of controversial social media posts attacking Sunak and his record directly.

Lib Dems leader Ed Davey [launched their campaign](#) by driving a tractor through some blue hay bales, an unambiguous message that the centrist party will be targeting the so-called blue wall – areas held by the Conservatives, primarily in the South, where the Lib Dems are the main challengers. The Greens launched [their campaign](#) with a pledge to introduce rent controls and build thousands of new council homes.

Key battlegrounds

Swindon - Labour's decision to launch its campaign here is a clear message it is aiming to strip the Conservatives of their small majority. Taking control of the council would be cause for celebration in Labour ranks, and fuel hopes the party has a stronger chance of winning both Conservative-held Swindon parliamentary seats in the next general election.

Derby – Labour will be looking to make gains here where the Conservatives run the council as a minority. Derbyshire in general is expected to be a key focus for the top two parties, after several councils in the area shifted away towards the Conservatives from Labour following Brexit.

North East Derbyshire - Labour will be keen to undo the 2019 result when the Conservatives gained a majority for the first time ever.

Darlington – 2019 saw Labour lose this council and then the parliamentary seat, one of several that made up the so-called red wall that swung to the Conservatives and ensured Johnson a solid election victory and House of Commons majority. The Tories or Labour would only require a few seat pick-ups to win control of the council.

Stoke-on-Trent - the Conservatives are one seat short of a majority and looking to hold off Labour from making gains that could alter control of the council.



Wokingham - the Conservatives are just short a majority on this council but must hold off a challenge from the Lib Dems who also only require a few seat gains to gain a majority in this blue wall marginal.

Stockport – another key Lib Dem target, where a gain of four seats would win them control of the council. A Lib Dem victory here would fuel hopes the party could win the parliamentary seats of Cheadle and Hazel Grove from the Conservatives.



Northern Ireland – Power-sharing paralysis looms large

In Northern Ireland, voters are set to elect 462 councillors across 11 councils in local elections on 18 May. As well as area-specific issues from local planning to waste disposal, ongoing disagreement about the post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland that led to the 2022 collapse of the Stormont government is looming large over the campaign. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refused to participate in Northern Ireland's power-sharing administration with Sinn Féin following May 2022 Assembly elections in protest over the Northern Ireland Protocol section of the UK-EU Brexit agreement. Although the UK and European Union signed a new deal in February, the [Windsor Framework](#), which promises to tackle many of the issues unionists objected to, the DUP have demanded further changes. The UK government has pushed back deadlines for the parties to return to Stormont several times, while the legislative paralysis has delayed action to reduce NHS backlogs and cost-of-living crisis support.

Republican party, Sinn Féin, leads in assembly voting intentions, followed by the DUP and Alliance, according to a recent Irish News, Institute of Irish Studies and University of Liverpool [poll](#). The three parties have all gained support since the 2022 assembly elections, with Sinn Féin on 30.6 percent of voting intentions, the DUP with 23.9 percent, and centrist non-sectarian Alliance party on 15.4 percent, while the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and SDLP have lost support. However, it remains to be seen how the polling translates to local election seats which are determined by a single transferrable vote system where voters rank candidates in order of preference. The Northern Ireland votes are not counted overnight so the results will start to be announced on Friday 19 May. The date of the local elections was pushed back two weeks to avoid the risk of the vote count being disrupted by King Charles III coronation on 6 May.

Sinn Féin First Minister Designate Michelle O'Neill has welcomed the Windsor Framework. In a [statement](#) marking President Joe Biden's visit to Northern Ireland to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, she urged the DUP and two governments to get the region's institutions up and running again to provide stability for businesses and local government. Alliance leader Naomi Long also said in late February that the Framework provided the basis for economic growth in Northern Ireland, but further clarity was needed around the Stormont Brake, a new mechanism which would enable Northern Irish parties to object to EU legislation applying in the region.

A [report by Queen's University Belfast](#) published in April found that 69 percent of voters in Northern Ireland thought the Framework could bring economic benefits for the region. However, it showed that only 25 percent of people who identified as "strongly unionist" agreed that the UK and European Commission had made a genuine effort to address concerns with the original protocol. Some experts expect the DUP to delay any decision on whether to return to the power-sharing government until after the local elections to avoid a risk of losing supporters to the hard-line Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), which is strongly against the Framework. DUP leader [Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has warned](#) supporters that votes for other unionist parties "hand seats to non-unionists", prompting criticism from a TUV [candidate](#).

Key battlegrounds

Ards and North Down Borough Council has traditionally been a unionist local authority. In recent Assembly elections, Alliance gained two seats whilst Strangford saw the TUV come close to gaining a seat outside of North Antrim. North Down is also known for its voter volatility, with Alliance gaining a Westminster seat in 2019.



Derry City and Strabane District Council saw Sinn Féin lose almost one-third of its council seats in 2019 before topping the poll again in the 2022 Assembly election. Smaller parties such as Aontú, People Before Profit, and other independents performed well in 2019 and secured 20.2% of the vote overall.

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