



LGiU

Ones to watch 2019



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2nd May 2019



248 English local elections

168 district councils

47 unitary councils

33 metropolitan borough councils



5 new councils



6 Mayoralties

5 executive mayors

1 combined authority mayor



11 Northern Ireland Council elections

Our ‘Ones to Watch’ guide forms part of our 2019 local elections support including on-the-night coverage and our guide to better election communications to support better democracy. Find out more about LGiU’s election work on our [website](#) and how you can help us tell the story of these local elections.

On 2 May, voters will go to the polls to choose over 8,300 councillors in 248 English local authorities. On the same day voters will also elect councillors to the eleven local authorities in Northern Ireland. The last time these seats were up for election (barring by-elections) was 2015 when the local elections coincided with the general election. The general election drew most of the press and political attention, and we saw that the results of the local and general elections were consistent. Conservatives made ground mainly from councils that were in “No Overall Control” and Labour didn’t lose much, although they did lose a handful of councils to the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats experienced a night of pain, nationally and locally.

Since those councillors were elected the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in 2016 and ‘enjoyed’ a snap general election in 2017, which left the nation with a hung parliament. At the time of writing, there is no clear consensus on how, or when, or perhaps whether, Brexit will take place. The local elections will be the first time voters go to the polls, after the date originally set for Brexit and with Parliament in a state of full on crisis. Inevitably they will draw a significant amount of attention from political watchers. But if local elections were wrongly overlooked when these seats were contested four years ago, this time they will be contested in an atmosphere where far too much may be read into them. They will carry the burden of standing in for an opinion poll on Europe and on national politics. Of course, in reality, they are neither of these things.

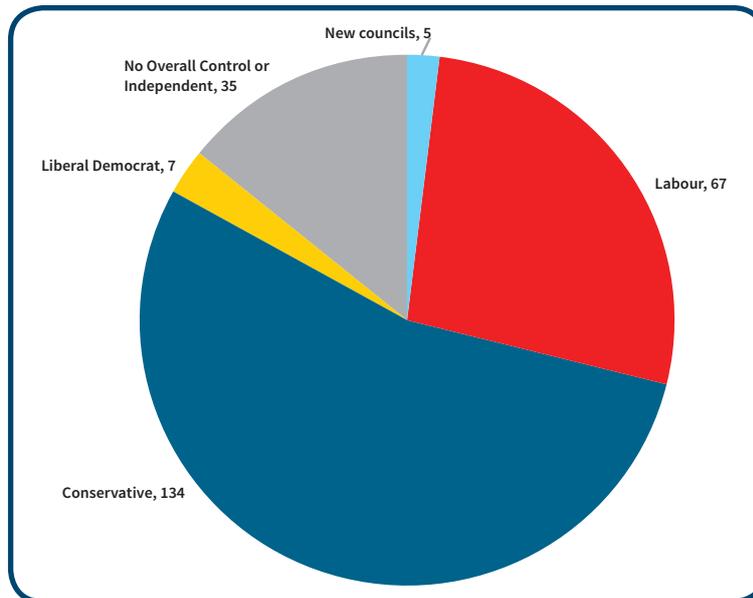
Local elections are ultimately about local matters and choosing the people who will make decisions on things that affect everything from the state of the street where we live, to the parks and playgrounds we take our kids to, or the safety of our food. They are not a substitute for a general election and without a clear consensus on the details of Brexit within any major political party they certainly cannot be an indication of the nation’s mood.

However, there is one area where we should expect the national to influence the local and that is a national overarching policy on matters like adult social care, devolution or even how local government might be sustainably funded. Sadly, coherent approaches to local government policy have been largely absent as parties and politicians have created a Brexit sized hole in the national discourse.

Since we cannot predict that many councils will actually change political control this year, there will be a great deal of reading the tea leaves of the national share of the vote. What we should really be watching this election season to judge the nation’s mood is turnout. Rates of participation in local elections in ‘off’ years have traditionally been low and Brexit has dominated the political discourse. How will a sense of rising dissatisfaction in national politics affect local take-up of basic civil rights? Will a decline in local journalism and the perennial difficulty of finding information about local candidates mean turnout is lacklustre? And if voter turnout across the nation hits the bottom, what does that say about the state of our democracy?

Overview

Pre-election council control



Of the 248 English councils holding elections the vast majority (134) are Conservative held and most of these are district councils in rural or suburban areas. Labour's 67 councils holding elections are largely unitary or metropolitan councils in the Midlands. The Liberal Democrats hold seven councils going in to these elections. Thirty-five councils are in 'No Overall Control' (NOC), meaning that no single party can form a majority and instead the council is run by either a coalition or minority administration.

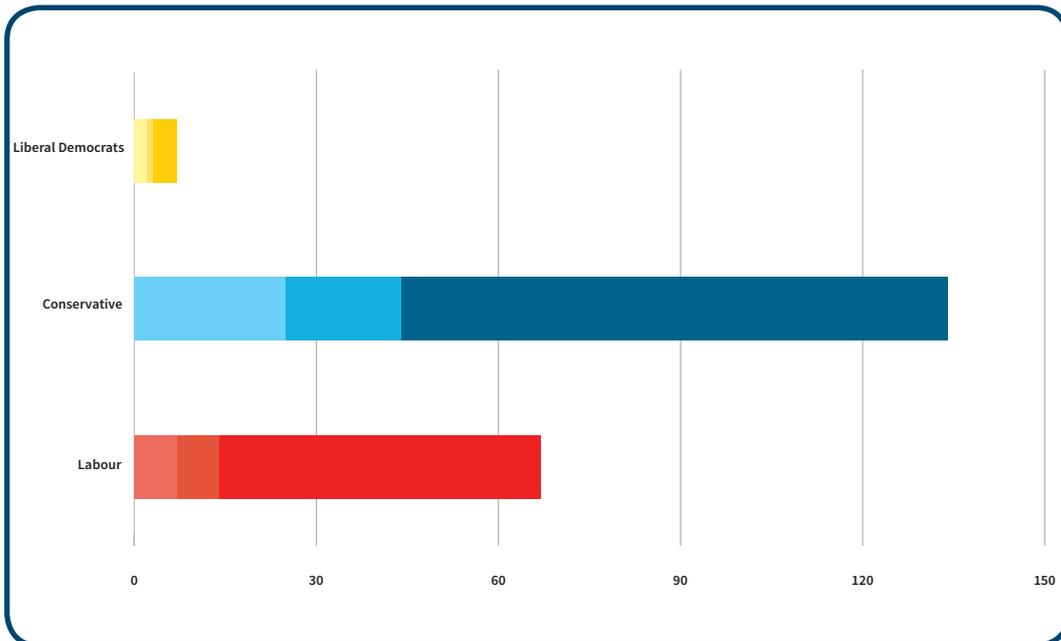
There are also five new councils which came into being on 1 April 2019 and they are holding elections for the first time.

There are three new 'super-districts', which are larger non-metropolitan district councils each formed by the merger of two districts councils:

- **East Suffolk** formed from the merger of Waveney and Suffolk Coastal District Councils
- **West Suffolk** formed from the merger of Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council
- **Somerset West and Taunton** which is formed from West Somerset and Taunton Deane councils.

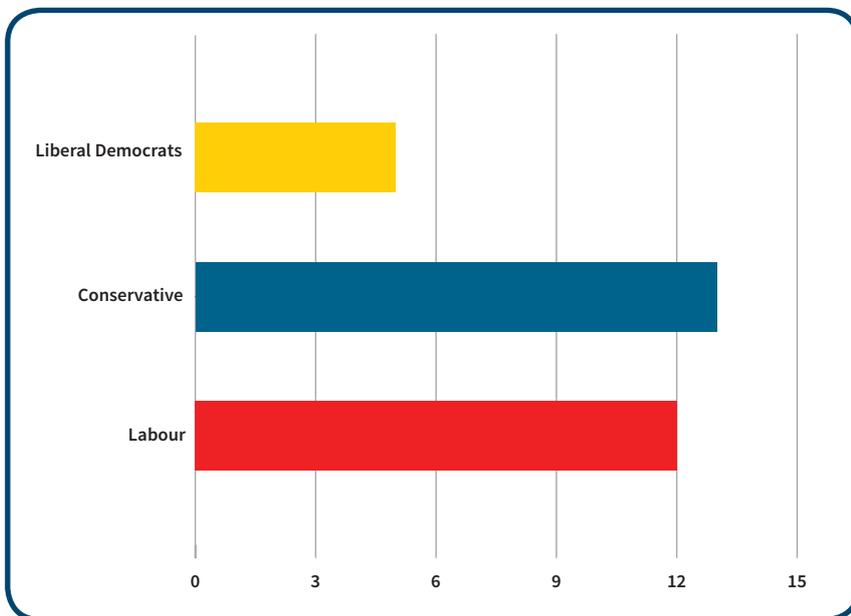
There are also two new unitary councils in Dorset. **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council** covers the more urban areas of Dorset and is formed from the two unitary councils of Bournemouth and Poole and the district council of Christchurch and its area of Dorset County Council. **Dorset Council** is formed from Weymouth and Portland, West Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, East Dorset and those parts of Dorset County Council.

All majority-run councils with elections and strength of political control



Some councils are more vulnerable to change of control or becoming a hung council. Those represented with lighter colours have smaller majorities.

Target NOC councils



NOC councils in reach of majority control for political parties. Some councils are counted twice as they are vulnerable to multiple parties.

Metropolitan Borough Councils

Metropolitan councils elect by thirds so while it is possible for councils to change control over the course of a single election, it isn't always very likely. Most metropolitan councils are in Labour heartlands and in some cases Labour majorities exceed the number of seats up for election, so it would be mathematically impossible for the council to change control. This is the case for 20 out of the 33 metropolitan council elections this year. There are, however, a few 'ones to watch'.

- **Bolton Council**, Labour since 2011, is now only narrowly Labour run and lost four net seats in the 2018 election.
- **Calderdale** has a nearly 20 year history of being a NOC council and is currently run by a Labour minority administration. They would need a small gain to take control.
- After the 2018 election, **Dudley** had a Conservative minority administration but in September the Conservative leader was removed and a Labour minority administration took power – a small change in fortunes could mean the council changes control again.
- **Stockport Council** is currently a Labour minority administration (24 seats) with a sizable Liberal Democrat (21 seats) and Conservative opposition (12 seats). Stockport voted 'Remain' by 8000 votes in the 2016 referendum so it's possible that this could be a Brexit influenced election and there could be a Liberal Democrat resurgence. However in the one election since the referendum, the Lib Dems only gained one net seat as did Labour.
- Until 2018, **Trafford** was the only Conservative controlled council in Greater Manchester, but following last May it has been a Labour minority administration with Liberal Democrat support. Trafford Conservatives might only need to make a net gain of a single seat to form a minority administration with support from others.
- Finally **Walsall** is a minority Conservative administration following a deciding vote cast by the Mayor between the Conservative Leader (with 30 seats after last May's election) and the former Labour leader (with 26 seats, but coalition support from 4 other councillors).

District Councils

Like metropolitan councils, many district councils also elect by thirds. About a quarter of the 168 district elections in 2019 use this method. Unlike many of the mets this year only 16 of the 48 electing by thirds have a mathematically safe majority.

Electing by thirds

The administration of **Maidstone** in Kent, is a fine balance with a Liberal Democrat minority administration. Conservatives have the largest number of councillors, but would need a net gain of 4 seats to take control.

In the 2018 elections in **Colchester** in Essex, the Conservatives made net gains on the council and form the largest party, but a coalition between Liberal Democrats, Labour and independent councillors have retained administration. A small net swing could see Conservatives take control and a slightly larger one could mean a Liberal Democrat administration.

Winchester in Hampshire has a narrow one seat Conservative majority, down slightly after the 2018 elections. Liberal Democrats are only one seat behind.

It's also worth keeping an eye on some other councils where political control is only narrowly held, but where the ruling party is by far the largest group and therefore less likely to lose control. These are:

- **Cannock Chase** in the West Midlands where Labour hold a one seat majority.
- **Three Rivers** in Hertfordshire where Liberal Democrats hold a two seat majority.
- **Mole Valley** in Surrey where Conservatives hold a one seat majority, but where independent councillors hold cabinet portfolios, meaning Conservatives would probably at least maintain a minority administration.
- **Tandridge** in Surrey has a Conservative majority of two.
- **Pendle** in Lancashire has not been Conservative held for long and has only a one seat majority.
- **Woking** in Surrey where Conservatives recently lost their one seat majority.

Hart in Hampshire has traditionally had very strong local residents' group representation and are currently administered by a LibDem and residents' groups coalition although Conservatives are the largest group. **Elmbridge** in Surrey was in the same position until Conservatives took control as a minority administration at full council vote.

Whole council elections

Ashfield in Nottinghamshire was a Labour council until the spring of 2018 when a host of defections to both an Independent group and the Conservatives prompted a no confidence vote in the Labour leadership. Independents are the largest grouping now, but voters may retain party allegiance even if the councillors haven't.

Forest of Dean council in Gloucestershire is led by Tim Gwilliam of the Forest First party. While Conservatives form the largest grouping, the Cabinet members also include a Green, UKIP and non-aligned independent members. Boundary changes here also mean a reduction in seats.

North Norfolk District Council has been all about change for a while. With 11 Conservative defections in 2018 to both an independent grouping and to the Liberal Democrats and a by-election resulting in a LibDem gain there was a change in leadership in Autumn 2018. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both hold 19 seats each. Boundary changes mean the number of councillors are also going down from 48 to 40.

Thanet Council in Kent was once a UKIP controlled council and a grouping of “Independent and UKIP” are still the second largest political grouping. Conservatives have just under two-fifths of the seats but hold the minority administration.

Mansfield in Nottinghamshire is run by Mansfield Independent Forum and the incumbent executive Mayor Kate Allsop is also Mansfield IF. But the balance is finely held with Labour holding an equal number of seats.

Lewes in East Sussex has a minority Conservative administration. But with over twice as many councillors as the next largest group, the Liberal Democrats, and a large number of independent councillors, a lot would have to change in order to shift leadership of the council. It's a similar story in **Allerdale** in Cumbria which has a Labour minority administration but almost twice as many as the next largest grouping – the Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats will be keen to maintain control of **South Somerset**, where they hold a majority of one.

Carlisle City Council in Cumbria is a Labour minority administration with the largest political grouping. However, they have only a one seat lead over the Conservatives.

Conservative minority administrations that need only a net gain of one seat are **Scarborough** in North Yorkshire and **Teignbridge** in Devon.

Other councils where a smallish swing could make a difference are:

- Labour held councils, **Lancaster** and **Crawley** in West Sussex.
- Conservative held councils: **Eden** in Cumbria, **High Peak** in Derbyshire, **Bromsgrove** in Worcestershire, **Dover** in Kent, and **Boston** in Lincolnshire.

The new combined ‘super districts’ **East Suffolk**, **West Suffolk** and **Somerset West and Taunton** described above are also worth watching because they are brand new councils. However all three are comprised of two Conservative controlled councils and all things being equal are unlikely to change control.

Unitary councils

There are 47 unitary councils holding elections this year. Of these, about a third are electing by thirds and the rest are whole council elections. Of those electing by thirds, only a handful have mathematically safe majorities.

Electing by thirds

Milton Keynes is a Labour minority administration with a confidence and supply agreement from Liberal Democrats. Though Conservatives actually have more seats than Labour it would take a fairly big swing to upset this arrangement. The same holds true in North East Lincolnshire.

Derby City Council is a Conservative administration with a confidence and supply agreement from an odd political pairing of Liberal Democrats and UKIP. Labour would need to make small net gains and/or a shift in confidence and supply to take control.

Portsmouth is a Liberal Democrat minority administration with support from Labour. LibDems and Conservatives have an equal number of seats. Either party would need to make a substantial net gain of five to take outright control.

Thurrock Council is a Conservative minority administration and would need a net gain of two to take outright control.

Other councils with small majorities include (in ascending order): **Peterborough** (CON), **Hartlepool** (LAB), **Plymouth** (LAB), **Swindon** (CON), **Southampton** (LAB) and **Hull** (LAB).

Whole council elections

The **City of York** is run by a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition, though all three main parties have roughly equal numbers of seats.

After a single councillor defected from Labour to Conservative in February 2019, Labour is no longer the largest party in **Brighton**. It could be all change in May.

Liberal Democrats lost their majority of **Bedford** Borough Council in 2015, but the LibDem executive mayor Dave Hodgson retained the mayoralty. His executive committee has LibDem, Labour, Conservative and Independent members.

Stoke-on-Trent has switched between Labour and NOC a number of times and the current Leader is Independent with Conservative support. It wouldn't take a huge swing for Labour to regain control.

The Labour group in **Redcar and Cleveland** will want to make those small net gains that they need to regain control. They have just less than half the seats with the remainder fairly evenly distributed across Liberal Democrats, Conservative and various independent councillors.

Herefordshire Conservatives hold the slimmest of majorities. Opposition groupings are spread across various independent groupings including one which may be the

only party grouping to include a punctuation mark It's our County!, as well as four Greens and a couple of Liberal Democrats. If local voters have had enough of the major political parties, this could be a hung council after 2 May.

Torbay is changing from an elected mayor model to Leader and Cabinet governance after this election. Conservatives currently hold half the seats on the council, but would need to gain a seat to hold control outright.

Since **Cheshire West and Chester** first held elections in 2008, Conservatives have been steadily losing seats and Labour has been steadily gaining – taking control in 2015. But the majority is slim.

Telford and Wrekin Council is Labour run with a slim majority, but Labour would need a fairly large net loss to no longer be the largest party.

It's also worth keeping an eye on the new unitaries **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole** Council and **Dorset** Council, but since predecessor councils were all Conservative it would be surprising if the new councils' control veered from this.



Mayoral elections

Five executive Mayors will be elected on 2 May. These and the current incumbents are:

- Bedford – Dave Hodgson (Lib Dem)
- Copeland –Mike Starkie (Ind)
- Leicester –Peter Soulsby (Lab)
- Mansfield –Kate Allsop (Mansfield Ind. Forum)
- Middlesbrough – Dave Budd (Lab)

North of Tyne will also hold an election for combined authority mayor for the first time.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland will also be holding local elections on 2 May. Many eyes may be trying to read the runes of the proportional representation – single transferrable vote system used in Northern Ireland. Will ‘Remain’ supporting voters in Northern Ireland send a message to the DUP whose members in Parliament have consistently failed to back Prime Minister Theresa May’s Brexit deal? Voters may choose to do this. But there are plenty of other reasons to send a message in Northern Ireland. Either the Democratic Unionist Party or Sinn Féin are the largest parties in all 11 Northern Irish councils and depending on your viewpoint both or either could be blamed for the failure of the power-sharing agreement in the Northern Ireland assembly.

Council	Largest party
Antrim and Newtownabbey	DUP
Ards and North Down	DUP
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	DUP
Belfast City	Sinn Féin
Causeway Coast and Glens	DUP
Derry and Strabane	Sinn Féin
Fermanagh and Omagh	Sinn Féin
Lisburn and Castlereagh	DUP
Mid and East Antrim	DUP
Mid-Ulster	Sinn Féin
Newry, Mourne and Down	Sinn Féin

LGiU learning and development

Throughout the year, we run an extensive and popular programme of events; post local elections in our events calendar there are a number of seminars that will be particularly relevant to newly elected councillors. To find out more about a particular seminar or to book a place please [visit our website](#).

Developing Political Awareness and Sensitivity for Officers,
Thursday 16th May

Understanding Strategic Thinking,
Tuesday 11th June

Practical Project Management,
Thursday 13th June

Being an effective Councillor: ways of strengthening and sustaining personal resilience, Wednesday 19th June

An Introduction to Local Government Finance,
Friday 21st June

Developing a Commercially Aware Organisational Culture,
Thursday 11th July

Being an effective councillor: influencing skills,
Tuesday 16th July

Support all new councillors with inhouse training

We also deliver inhouse events and training tailored to a council's specific requirements, contact [Barry O'Brien](mailto:barry.obrien@lgiu.org.uk) at barry.obrien@lgiu.org.uk to find out more.

LGiU

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LGiU is a local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.

LGiU and the local elections

Out for the Count is an awareness raising campaign dedicated to improving local democracy with a call for open and accessible local elections data across the UK.

Over the past eight years, the LGiU has provided live local elections coverage and a results service with insights into what's happening on the ground and what it means for the country as a whole. Telling the story of what's happening in the locals and raising awareness of these issues is something we are proud to be continuing this year.

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