Local elections 2022

Ones to watch

LGiU
About Ones to Watch

We are proud to once again release LGIU’s Ones to Watch guide to the local elections with what’s at stake and up for grabs as voters go to the polls on 5 May 2022 to elect over 6,000 local representatives across England, Scotland and Wales.

LGIU’s Ones to Watch is less prognostication and more a highlight of the key local contests to have on your radar in the lead up to polling day. While it may be tempting to some to use local elections as a temperature check on national politics, each council area and indeed each seat in each ward is its own race and influenced at least as much by local issues and personalities as national political parties.

These local elections are the most important elections of all: the ones that make a real difference to our communities, to the places we live and work, to the public services that we all rely on. That is why, for well over a decade, we’ve been working with local government to bring you the best support, resources and commentary before, during and after these all important elections.

For 2022, we have been delving into our extensive local government library to showcase some of the most pertinent resources for you and your teams along with the fresh analysis and coverage you’ve come to expect from us across key election themes including: public trust, covid safety, transparency, personal safety and diversity.

Register on our website (selecting Democracy, Devolution and Governance as a topic of interest) so you never miss any of our local elections updates.

And, be sure to get in touch to tell us about what you’re up to and if there is any further support we can provide you in the lead up to polling day.
Where are local elections happening?

5th May 2022

- 146 councils in England
- All 32 councils in Scotland
- All 22 councils in Wales
- Six directly elected mayors in England
- One metropolitan mayor in England

England

Of the English councils holding elections, most are electing a third or half of their councillors. These seats were last up for election in 2018. The remainder are electing all their councillors.

There are four newly created councils in England holding elections this year. In Cumbria, the county and districts are being replaced by two new unitary councils, Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness. The newly elected councils will act as shadow councillors for 12 months before beginning a four-year term when the new councils formally begin in 2023. In North Yorkshire, the districts and county are being replaced by a single unitary authority. Councillors elected in the county elections in 2022 will become councillors for the unitary authority in 2023. Finally, in Somerset, the county and districts are being replaced by a single unitary Somerset Council. These councillors will take on county council responsibilities for a year, before taking over for district councillors in 2023.

Mayors up for election include Watford as well as 5 London boroughs. All are currently held by Labour except for Watford, which has a Liberal Democrat mayor. South Yorkshire is also electing a combined authority mayor.
Scotland

All 32 local authorities in Scotland are holding elections. Scottish local elections use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system to elect multi-member wards. Elections were last held in 2017.

The three island authorities – and three authorities which include large islands – have had their boundaries reviewed as a result of the 2018 Islands Act, resulting in new boundaries for Orkney, Shetland, Na h-Eileanan Siar and North Ayrshire.

Wales

All 22 Welsh local authorities are holding elections under new boundaries. For the first time, all legal residents of Wales over the age of 16 will be able to vote. All councils will be using First Past the Post to elect councillors, although councils now have the right to switch to Single Transferable Vote for future elections.

Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly and Torfaen will be offering ‘flexible voting’, with many voters able to cast their vote at a central polling station ahead of election day.

Why this year’s locals really matter..

The local elections are, of course, about local issues. However, national trends have an effect on why people vote the way they do and local nuance can easily be missed.

The last time most of these councils were up for election in 2018, the pandemic had not happened and war did not dominate the news. The tragic events of Grenfell were still casting a shadow over political life. Nearly 5 years on, a line is yet to be drawn under the issues of fire safety and cladding remediation, although these issues are unlikely to be hot topics in local election discussions. However, lack and cost of housing and energy prices are key concerns for many voters and councils, whether it’s clashes over greenfield development, renewable energy, rents or regulation of HMOs.

For some voters, active travel and clean air will be high on the agenda. Some councils have ambitious targets to cut private car use and implement low emission zones, while others are reluctant to introduce measures even when nudged by central governments and indeed are now removing cycle lanes. Across England, Scotland and Wales, the pandemic proved a turning point for active travel campaigners, as people enjoyed cleaner air in lockdown and were confined to their local areas. Local debates can be hard for councillors to navigate, faced with the twin challenges of improving life for their constituents while representing the views of those constituents.

Many councils are continuing to face difficult decisions about funding especially when seen in the context of the current cost of living crisis. Raising council tax, increasing fees and charges, identifying services where expenditure can be reduced: these are things that the average council is grappling with. The stark position that councils find themselves in, however, is not always well understood by voters. Some voters see potholes, weeds and untidy parks and assume mismanagement is to blame, not cuts to local government funding. Not getting the basics right can result in political
upheaval for individual councillors at election time: uncollected bins are immediately obvious, protecting vulnerable adults from service cuts is not.

Council tax rises, on the other hand, are extremely visible to voters. With over two thirds of English councils expecting to raise council tax, this will be the subject of many political pronouncements in the coming weeks. Most local authorities in Scotland are also raising council tax. From April 2023, Welsh local authorities will not only be able to raise council tax - they will also be able to levy significant premiums on second homes.

In Scotland, national attitudes towards local government will form a part of many local campaigns most especially in authorities currently controlled by the SNP. The independence debate remains topical and unresolved. As English councils continue to evolve, there are few signs of any serious movement towards local devolution in Scotland indeed the potential formation of a National Care Service highlights a centralisation approach taken by SNP Ministers as with Police and Fire services.

A lack of diversity is a key challenge for local authorities. Across England, Scotland and Wales, most councillors are men. Despite efforts to combat this in recent years, after this year’s local elections, most councillors will still be men. England (where 36% of councillors are women) is slightly ahead of Scotland (29%) and Wales (28%).

Covid, has not gone away and post pandemic recovery is also high on the agenda. Turnout at the 2021 local elections in England was comparable to previous years (despite nearly a third of voters in London expressing concerns about whether voting in person was safe).

...in England

In England, at this point in the electoral cycle – where many metropolitan boroughs are up for election, not to mention every London council – it will be a tricky one for the Conservatives in England. In 2018, some analysts wondered if the beleaguered national administration – faced with economic difficulties, Brexit, ministerial resignations, Windrush – would see bleak consequences for local Conservative administrations. Instead, despite a few shake-ups, 2018 was a victory for the status quo.

...in Scotland

In Scotland 2017, by contrast, Conservatives performed well, gaining 164 new councillors and Labour lost 133. Scottish Labour also lost majority control of three councils, leaving every council in Scotland in no overall control. There is little to suggest that May 2022 will change much: 2021 Holyrood elections resulted in minimal shifts to representation, other than the creation of a formal coalition agreement between SNP and Greens in Scottish Parliament. For the first time the convenor of the Local Government committee is from the Scottish Greens.

...in Wales

Labour also struggled in Wales at the 2017 local elections, losing over 100 seats and control of three councils. Less than a year later, Carwyn Jones - party leader and
First Minister - resigned, and Mark Drakeford took over in December 2018. Careful leadership and a decent Senedd election last year could augur well for Labour at this year’s Welsh local elections.

Current political makeup of councils up for election across England, Wales and Scotland
Ones to watch – England

Introduction

Last time these seats were up for election, in 2018, the collapse of the UKIP vote boosted Conservative fortunes. Absent that factor, it’s possible that the Conservatives may struggle this year – not to mention reputational issues at a national level. In areas such as London, maintaining seats and vote share would be an excellent result.

There is often a temptation to use local elections to gauge which party – Labour or the Conservatives – is in the ascendance. Local issues, local parties, councils electing by thirds and the nature of the councils up for election each year muddy the messages that local elections send.

Nonetheless, the 2021 council elections in England were a difficult night for Labour: down eight councils and 327 councillors. Some finely balanced councils were lost to the Conservatives, while the Greens gained seats from Labour. However, Labour did well with the mayoral seats, successfully defending the London and single authority mayoral elections, taking the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough mayoralty from the Conservative incumbent and winning the first mayoral election for West Yorkshire.

A number of Liberal Democrat held councils are up for election this year, including the directly elected mayorality in Watford. The party will be hoping to expand their number of local councillors and strengthen key majorities.

Organisational reforms proposed in the wake of the Thornhill Review – a review of the party’s 2019 general election performance – will not yet have had time to percolate throughout the party structure. Changes to candidate selection processes have also been planned. Nonetheless, since last May, the Lib Dems have performed well in by-
elections – their wins in Conservative held seats are perhaps a good omen for their key battlegrounds in the 2022 elections.

The Greens have secured some stunning by-election victories in their target councils, with their total councillor numbers in England approaching 500. In fact, they have made more by-election gains than any other political party since the May 2021 elections. Although by-elections tend to favour parties with the ability to campaign on hyper-local issues, voter sentiment is increasingly Green.

Ones to watch

East Midlands

This point in the election cycle is a quiet one in the East Midlands, where just 3 councils are holding elections. Although councils which elect by thirds can be tricky to read, keep an eye on Amber Valley. Since 1973 the council has changed political control ten times. The most recent flip was in 2021 when the Conservatives gained 9 seats, seizing control from the Labour administration – which had only been in place since 2019.

Reform UK won their first council seats in Derby in 2021 (their existing councillors elsewhere having defected from other parties). Both councillors - Alan Graves and Alan Graves Jr - now represent local party Reform Derby. The Conservatives will be looking to continue making gains here - after the 2021 election the leader claimed they would be in control had all seats been up for election.

And finally… A new prison in Leicestershire has been named by public suggestion: HMP Fosse Way, after the Roman Road, was selected by a panel of local representatives, including council leaders.

East of England

St Albans is a two way battle between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, changing hands frequently over the years. New boundaries mean every seat is up for election this year - the Conservatives are still smarting from losing control of this council last year, so expect a fight.
Watch out for Southend’s first election as a City, a status granted in tribute to Sir David Amess MP. The council is currently led by a partnership agreement between Labour, the Independent Group and Lib Dems.

South Cambridgeshire has all its seats up for election for only the second time - prior to the last elections in 2018 it elected by thirds. That 2018 election saw a stunning victory for the Lib Dems, who gained 19 seats and seized control of the council.

Last year’s elections in Harlow saw an end to nearly 10 years of Labour control as the Conservatives unseated the leader and took nearly every seat up for election.

The Lib Dems will be hoping to win their sixth successive mayoral election in Watford — although Labour’s vote share improved significantly last time around.

And finally... Warner Bros paid St Albans City and District Council £25,000 for the use of Verulamium Park as a filming location for a new Willy Wonka film.

London

The 2018 local elections were a good night for Labour, who won 44% of the popular vote.

Watch out for Barnet. Shortly before the 2018 local elections, the Conservatives lost their majority of one – but a great result in the May elections delivered them a 13 seat majority. The council has new ward boundaries this year – and the leader of the council has said his group is “disappointed” by some of the changes.

2018 was also a good year for the Greens in London, who won triple the number of seats they did in 2014. Richmond and Lambeth have the largest groups of sitting Green councillors.

2018 saw a changing of the guard in Kingston as the Lib Dems gained 21 seats to take control of the council from the Conservatives – and Labour went from two councillors to zero.

Local politics in Tower Hamlets has been somewhat tumultuous in recent years. 2018 saw Labour re-take every seat it had lost in 2014 to the since-discredited Tower Hamlets First party.

The Conservatives successfully defended their key battlegrounds of Wandsworth and Westminster in 2018, despite losing 7 and 3 seats to Labour respectively.

And finally... Tower Hamlets was the first council to declare a result in the 2018 local elections.

North East

This part of the country has few key battlegrounds: Labour, which holds majority control of every council up for election bar one, should have little to worry about.

The exception is Hartlepool. The council is currently run by a Conservative-
Independent coalition. Many of the independent councillors formerly belonged to UKIP and, briefly, the Brexit Party. The 2021 local elections here were run concurrently with the parliamentary by-election which delivered a historic victory for the Conservatives: the local party also had a good night, gaining 10 seats. In fact, every candidate the Conservatives put forward won a seat.

This year? Labour, under their first female group leader, will be fighting hard and recent general election polling has been more favourable for the party. The 2021 council elections were far from disastrous, leaving them up 5 councillors. A strong tradition of independent and minor party councillors in Hartlepool means the final make-up of the administration is anyone’s guess, but a good night for Labour could leave them well placed to take over.

And finally… Hartlepool’s train station is set to re-open its second platform as the council point out it is the busiest single platform station in the UK.

North West

Trafford was taken from the Conservatives by Labour in 2018, first as a minority administration and then as a majority after the 2019 local elections. Last year only increased their majority. Otherwise, this region has a large number of Labour councils where little change is expected. One of the exceptions is Pendle – all out elections last year due to boundary changes saw the Conservatives take control. The Lib Dems were reduced to 5 councillors.

Watch out too for Wirral, Burnley, Rossendale, Bolton and West Lancashire, all of which have lost Labour majorities in the past few years. For many of these minority administrations, it would take a handful of gains – sometimes just one seat – to form a majority again. Naturally, budget discussions at some of these councils have been particularly fraught in the run-up to these local elections.

And finally… In Hyndburn, Samina Mahmood is aiming to become the borough’s first Asian woman to win a seat on the council.

South East

Conservatives in Maidstone had a good night in 2021, taking overall control of the council (and almost immediately taking steps to move the authority to all-out elections, which will take place in 2024). Recent defections have left the local Lib Dems with a depleted group, but they will be hoping to regain some ground here.

In Worthing, the Conservatives lost overall control last year but continued to run the council as a minority administration. Pressure from central government to deliver housing has been a key local issue, with the council and local MP united in their efforts to prevent the development of greenfield land.

Last year Southampton was retaken by the Conservatives after nine years of Labour control. The authority remains finely balanced – if Labour can flip a single seat, the council will be back in no overall control. Two seats, and control rests with Labour again.
And finally… a counting error at the 2021 local elections saw the wrong winner announced for a ward in Cherwell.

**South West**

Only a handful of councils in this region are holding elections this year. Politically volatile, *Plymouth* currently has a Conservative leader running a minority administration, but suspensions and resignations within the Conservative group since the 2021 election mean that Labour now has the same number of councillors. At time of writing, the Conservative leader is awaiting the results of a no confidence vote.

*Somerset* has its first elections as a newly created unitary, electing nearly double the number of councillors as the old county council had but using the same boundaries. The Conservatives controlled the county council, although the Lib Dems do well in many parts of the county.

And finally… *Bristol* are holding a referendum on whether the city should continue to have a directly elected mayor.

**West Midlands**

The councils up for election this year in the West Midlands are a mixture of Conservative and Labour controlled authorities. *Solihull* was a finely balanced council until last year, when the Conservatives significantly increased their majority.

A long running bin strike in Coventry is unlikely to swing the balance of power in this Labour controlled council, but the Conservatives could continue to make gains here. *Cannock Chase*, *Worcester*, *Dudley* and *Nuneaton and Bedworth* councils all gained Conservative majority administrations last year. Labour faces an especially uphill battle in Dudley and Nuneaton and Bedworth, where Conservative gains last year make taking back control difficult.

And finally… *Solihull Council* are now using a self-driving shuttle to transport passengers around *Birmingham Airport*.

**Yorkshire and Humber**

Keep an eye on *Sheffield* – a Labour council until last year. The Lib Dems and Greens made gains here last year. Labour will also be defending their mayoralty in *South Yorkshire*, where Dan Jarvis has been mayor since the first election to the combined authority in 2018. Jarvis came close to securing 50% of first preference votes in 2018. He is not standing for re-election this year.

And finally… *Pontefract in Wakefield* was the location of the first secret ballot to election an MP to the House of Commons, at a by-election in August 1872.
Ones to watch – Scotland

Introduction

The 2021 Holyrood elections SNP won their fourth successive term and entered into a coalition with the Scottish Greens. It will be interesting to see how local, national and international problems play in the minds of the electorate at the 2022 local elections. As well as the local and community issues affecting voters in each council area. Turnout of voters is also likely to have an impact and different council areas have in the past had very different levels of voter turnout.

Many experienced and senior councillors, including leaders and spokespeople are stepping down, with some reports placing turnover at half of all sitting councillors. In Edinburgh for example, 6 out of 11 Labour councillors and 7 out of 17 Conservatives are standing down. Selection contests appear to have been a challenge for some parties, with some of Labour and SNP’s selections going to the wire.

The 2017 local elections left Scotland with no party in majority control. Some councils have minority administrations; others operate power sharing agreements and coalitions. For many councillors, who are often working in cooperation with councillors from other parties, this has changed the way local politics looks and works. For others, the experience has been less positive and it can disrupt the relationship between the central party and its local branches.

The SNP will be hoping to defend all positions and especially those in authorities they have a lead role in, including Glasgow, Dundee and East Ayrshire which they currently run as a minority administration. Minor gains in areas like West Dunbartonshire, South Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire could see them gain overall control.

At the last local elections in 2017, Scottish Conservatives gained 164 councillors and replaced Labour as the second-largest party in terms of council seats, it will be interesting to observe how Westminster politics affects voting in Scotland. Nearly three quarters of Conservative candidates who stood for seats were elected. High turnout and voters energised by a campaign that focused on the constitution were undoubtedly a factor. The Conservative party could struggle to defend some of these gains. They had been distancing themselves from their Westminster brethren, but their leader, Douglas Ross has since rescinded his letter asking the Prime Minister to resign and Boris Johnson attended the party’s Spring conference. Attack lines at local elections include a commitment from Ross that no Conservative-run council will introduce a workplace parking levy, introduced by the SNP at Holyrood in cooperation with the Greens.
In 2017 elections, Scottish Labour lost control of four councils where they had previously had a majority administration. Although Labour currently share power with the SNP in six councils including Edinburgh. Liberal Democrats run one council (plus arrangements in Aberdeen - more on that later) Labour leader Anas Sarwar has ruled out any coalitions with SNP or Conservatives after the May 2022 elections. Candidates for Labour are expected to be pro-UK.

At the last local elections, 168 independent councillors were elected across Scotland. The largest concentrations are in Shetland, Orkney, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Highland and Angus, all of which also currently have independent council leaders. At the time of publication three out of five independent leaders have declared they are stepping down. Angus Council leader has had a change of heart and recently confirmed he will stand again. In Orkney the Green party are fielding candidates in a traditionally independent area. These five councils are definitely ones to watch. Voters who depend on ferry services as well as air services will be watching carefully how political parties deal with transport and digital connectivity as well as taking steps to address fuel poverty.

The Greens will be hoping to increase their councillor numbers in Edinburgh and Glasgow - with an eye to possible coalition or partnership agreement arrangements after the elections. They will also be hoping to elect their first councillors to councils including West Lothian, East Lothian and Scottish Borders (where they narrowly missed out on electing an MSP last year). Orkney’s first Green councillor, elected in 2017, is not standing for re-election this year, although the party is fielding five candidates.

Alba Party failed to gain any seats in the 2021 Holyrood elections, but do have 16 sitting councillors as a result of defections and independent councillors joining the party. Even in Aberdeen, where leader Alex Salmond stood on the regional list, the party received only 2.1% of the list vote: they could struggle to defend their seats this May.

This is the second round of local elections that 16- and 17-year-olds and qualifying foreign nationals can vote in.
Ones to watch

Watch out for **Aberdeen**, where SNP became the largest party in 2017 but were kept out of power by a Labour-Conservative coalition. Suspended by then leader Kezia Dugdale, those 9 Labour councillors spent the next 4 years as ‘Aberdeen Labour’. They were recently told they could contest the 2022 elections as Labour candidates.

In **Aberdeenshire**, Alison Evison, incumbent President of COSLA and a Labour councillor since 2012, has announced she will be contesting the upcoming elections as an independent.

Many in Scottish Labour will have their sights set on **Glasgow City**, which they lost control of in 2017 for the first time since the council was created. Since then SNP administration has not had the easiest run, with defections, union action and local battles over libraries and bins however Glasgow hosted COP26 on a world stage.

**South Ayrshire** has been run by a power sharing agreement between SNP, Labour and Independent councillors since 2017 despite the Conservatives being the largest party. Between 2012 and 2017, the council was run by a Labour-Conservative coalition. The leader and depute leader have shared their hopes that whatever the next administration looks like, projects like the regeneration of Ayr town centre are not disrupted by party politics.

It’s all change at **Shetland** as four of the most senior councillors are not seeking re-election (former council leader Gary Robinson is standing again, having lost his seat in 2017).

*And finally… Na h-Eileanan Siar is currently an all-male council. The authority has appealed for women to stand and organised a workshop for prospective female candidates ahead of the 2022 local elections.*
Ones to watch – Wales

Introduction

All 22 Welsh councils are up for election this year, alongside town and community councils.

The First Minister’s careful cooperation with councils during the pandemic means that the narrative around the status of councils differs from that in Scotland - although devolving further powers to councils is still not top of the agenda.

This will be the first local elections that 16- and 17-year-olds and qualifying foreign nationals can vote in.

The 2017 local elections were disappointing for Labour, who lost over 100 councillors and control of three councils. The Conservatives and Plaid Cymru, by contrast, made good gains. However, many commentators agreed that the Senedd elections in Wales last year were a success story for Labour, as Welsh Labour gained a seat and improved their constituency and list vote share. The Conservatives gained five seats and Plaid Cymru one – but Plaid Cymru’s vote share fell. The collapse of the UKIP vote meant all three parties picked up seats.

Boundary changes mean almost every council - with the exception of Pembrokeshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf - has seen changes to the number of councillors it elects. The Vale of Glamorgan has gained the most – seven – while Blaenau Gwent has lost the most – nine.

Bar any unexpected electoral earthquakes, expect Labour to have a decent night - possibly even gaining back some of the seats and councils it lost in 2017.
Ones to watch

Plaid Cymru will be fighting to keep the four councils where it currently governs in coalition. A bad night for Plaid Cymru could see a political shake-up at Carmarthenshire, which has a significant Labour group as well as many independent councillors. It’s likely that they will keep majority control of Gwynedd, although they face opposition from local party Llais Gwynedd.

The Liberal Democrat vote has still not recovered in Cardiff, where the party ran the council for many years until losing 19 councillors at the 2012 local elections. Labour are well placed to keep control of the city.

Watch for results from Conwy, where the Conservatives are in coalition with independent councillors. Plaid Cymru have 10 seats and Labour are not far behind on eight. With boundary changes reducing the number of council seats by four, things could be interesting in Conwy.

Monmouthshire is the only Welsh council run by a Conservative majority administration. Although their majority isn’t tiny, it’s feasible that this council could return to no overall control.

And finally… the first openly non-binary mayor in Wales, Owen J Hurcum, is not seeking re-election this year as they have been offered a chance to renovate and live on a boat in Norfolk.
More from LGIU’s one-stop shop for local elections

**Local elections support and resources:** Our one-stop shop of the most pertinent local elections resources for you and your teams are now available [here](#). Each week, we add the fresh analysis and coverage you’ve come to expect from us across key election themes including: public trust, covid safety, transparency, personal safety and diversity. Sign up today so you never miss an update.

**Communications guide:** Local elections matter and how we talk about them matters. Effective communications can build enthusiasm for local democracy and this communications guide focuses on some easy steps that councils can take during the election period.

**Personal Safety guide:** This short guide offers some guidance on assessing risk and adopting strategies and behaviours that will minimise any potential hazards that might be identified as part of a councillor’s role.

**Diversity in political representation in the UK:** This publication examines diversity in political representation, including the most recent data on ethnicity and disability in relation to councillors, barriers faced by black, ethnic minority and disabled candidates and councillors and what can be done to increase diversity.

**Our full post-election training programme:** We know that the weeks and months following an election can involve many learning curves for new councillors.

The LGIU team has put together an extensive range of online training covering the [essential skills](#) councillors will need to hit the ground running and additional programmes focused on how you can take your skills to the [next level](#) and [beyond](#).

We can also develop a [tailored in-house training programme](#) for your council, please [get in touch](#) with our training manager to discuss your requirements.

**Are you an LGIU member?** If not, [get in touch](#) with us for a free trial.

LGIU was founded in the UK in 1983. Now as LGIU England & Wales, LGIU Scotland, LGIU Ireland and LGIU Australia, we work for and with local authorities around the world, helping them to serve their local communities more effectively. We provide our members with the mix of insight, ideas and innovation that they need to get the job done and plan for the future. Put simply, we are here supporting local government every day.
Author: Charlotte Maddix