

An in depth look at England's 2016 local elections: what are the key contests?



Following on from their [overview of England's 2016 Local Elections](#), Tony Travers and Martin Rogers take a closer look at the key council contests for each party.

A closer look at the key contests

We've put together a database, which you can [download as a PDF](#) or in [Excel format](#), outlining a number of council contests which we judge will be of particular interest across England. The Councils highlighted in this database are contests which are of interest for different reasons, such as:

- Councils which may see a change of control
- Where Labour should be looking to perform strongly given demographic factors in their favour
- Where Labour should be looking to win seats to indicate that it is relevant to swing voters in the south of England
- Where Labour might expect to squeeze Liberal Democrat and Green Party votes
- Tight marginal contests between the major parties which will be informative for the future of British politics
- Where the Liberal Democrats will hope to do well and, if successful, would demonstrate they are improving their position
- Where the Conservatives will hope to do well if they are holding their position compared to 2012, which was not a great year for them
- Where UKIP need to do well if they are to show that they remain an electoral force in UK politics, particularly given the background of the EU referendum in June

Councils which may see a change of control

Derby is of particular interest as the Labour majority of three may be turned into a position of No Overall Control if Labour has a disappointing night.



Exeter may see a loss from majority control to NOC but this would indicate a very poor result for Labour if this happens.

Welwyn Hatfield currently has a Conservative majority of ten but will face an all-out election so a loss of control here can more easily occur than in those councils where only one third of seats are up for election. If the Conservatives lose control it will be a poor night for the party.

Watford is currently controlled by the Liberal Democrats, an administration headed by an elected mayor. A strong performance by the Liberal Democrats in this all-out election will see them take full control of the council. This contest could give an indication as to the relative position of the parties in the country as a whole.

Where Labour might look to perform strongly given demographic factors

A key contest here is **Norwich**. A large student population should be favourable to a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour party while significant Liberal Democrat and Green presence on the council means there are potential votes for Labour to convert. The vote here will test the theory that Green Party votes can be used as a proxy for where to expect a strong support base for Labour under Corbyn. A good performance by Labour could see it win all of the thirteen seats up for election as this is one of the most favourable contests for the contemporary Labour Party.

Where Labour should be looking to win seats to show it is relevant to swing voters in the South East

The contests for the councils of **Basingstoke and Deane**, **Watford**, **Welwyn Hatfield** and **Woking** will be indicative of Labour's performance amongst south of England swing voters who supported Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair but who subsequently appear to have deserted the party.

Failure to capture seats in places like this would potentially indicate that Labour would struggle to form a government after the next General Election.

Cannock Chase is currently Labour-controlled with a majority of three, but ten Labour seats are up for election. Labour's performance here will give an indication as to the party's popularity amongst small 'c' conservative voters where UKIP currently holds five councillors. A good performance from Labour would see them consolidate their position on this highly-marginal council but a strong performance from the Conservatives could see them gain outright control. The most likely outcome may be a change to No Overall Control.

Where Labour might look to squeeze Liberal Democrat and Green Party votes

Exeter, similar to **Cambridge**, **Oxford** and **Norwich**, is an area where Labour under Jeremy Corbyn might be looking to perform well and gain seats. The demographics of the area should be well suited the profile of the expanded Labour membership since the September leadership election. Exeter and Norwich are places where Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are in direct competition and it should be possible to observe which of the parties is able to take votes from the others. Conservatives are often in marginal wards.

Tight marginal contests

There are a number of tight marginal contests which will give some indication as to the outcome of the next general election. **Stockport**, **Milton Keynes**, **Plymouth**, **Southampton**, **Thurrock**, **Pendle**, **St Albans** and **Weymouth & Portland** are of particular interest.

Stockport is currently controlled by the Liberal Democrats which makes it one of only a handful of councils which the party runs. If they are able to consolidate their position it may be an indicator of

a possible Lib Dem revival in some parts of the country.

Milton Keynes is very tightly contested between Labour and the Conservatives with the Lib Dems as a significant third party. The demographics of Milton Keynes suggest that it will be a potential signpost to the popularity of each party in key Midlands and south of England seats. The population of Milton Keynes is slightly younger than the UK average which may be an advantage for the Labour party, though there are high levels of owner-occupation.

Southampton has a history of marginal Parliamentary seats and wards so the result here should be an indicator of wider trends.

Thurrock is not representative of the country as a whole in terms of demographics but it is a very marginal swing seat (including three-way wards) with a significant UKIP presence both on the council and at the May 2015 General Election.

Pendle is finely poised. The Conservatives have only one more councillor than Labour currently, while both have six seats up for election in addition to the four currently held by the Liberal Democrats. Whether either party is able to make gains, and if so from whom, will provide evidence about the standing of the two major parties in the country.

Where Liberal Democrat success should indicate if they are enjoying a revival

For signs of a Lib Dem revival, key indicators will be the contests in **Stockport, Milton Keynes, Watford, Winchester, Norwich, and St Albans**.

St Albans could see the Conservatives losing power if there were to be a Lib Dem revival. Such a change might indicate that the party could start to reverse some of its 2015 general election losses to the Conservatives.

The party's showing in Norwich will indicate whether the Lib Dems are enjoying a revival in an authority that could, until recently, be considered their heartland and an area with a large student population. This demographic is now more heavily contested by the Labour party so the Lib Dem showing here should tell us about their potential to recover at Labour's expense.

Where the Conservatives will hope to do well

There are a number of contests which will be indicative of the Conservatives' standing. Coalition included, the Conservatives have now been in power for six years. After such a long period in power, a party would not usually expect to perform particularly strongly in 'mid-term' local elections. However, given the current polling position of the Labour Party, a number of contests will be indicative of the Conservatives' chances of consolidating their position: **Trafford, Plymouth, Swindon, Amber Valley, Basingstoke & Deane, Cannock Chase, Crawley, Redditch, Rossendale, St Albans, and Worcester**.

In **Swindon** a weak Conservative performance and a loss to No Overall Control, would indicate an underpowered performance from the party and be a cause for concern.

Trafford is an authority where the Conservatives are in a relatively comfortable position. The loss of control here would represent a setback for the party, whereas a moderate performance would see the Conservatives increase their majority of five. Trafford is currently the only Conservative council out of the 10 'Greater Manchester' authorities. It is one of only two Conservative-controlled metropolitan districts.

Plymouth is currently controlled by Labour but is highly marginal and the Conservatives could take control. Failure to do so could be seen as a relatively weak result by the Conservatives.



The highly-marginal council of **Amber Valley** will be a key indicator of Conservative success. After six years of Conservative-led government Labour should be looking to win control. If the Conservatives are able to maintain or improve their position it would be a good performance.

Labour currently has a majority of one on **Crawley Council** but with eight Labour seats up for election and five Conservative seats, this is a knife-edge contest. A reasonable result for the Conservatives would see them take control.

Redditch is currently controlled by Labour with a majority of one. There are seven Labour seats up for election against two Conservative held seats, so the Conservatives should be looking to take control of this council if they perform well.

A strong performance in **Rossendale** would see the Conservatives take control of the council while a moderate showing could result in a move to No Overall Control.

Worcester is currently Conservative-controlled with a majority of three. A strong performance from the Conservatives would see them improve their position in a key with key parliamentary marginal seats.

Where UKIP will hope to do well if they are to demonstrate they remain an electoral force

UKIP will hope for strong showings in **Thurrock, Harlow, Redditch** and **Rushmoor**. **Thurrock** currently has 11 UKIP councillors and, with only one UKIP councillor up for re-election in May, the party will hope to increase its presence. But after UKIP's failure to secure more than one Parliamentary seat despite nearly four million votes in May 2015, and its failure to make more of an impact at the Oldham West and Royton by-election, the 2016 local elections are important for UKIP to show that it is still a viable electoral force in Britain.

UKIP has eleven councillors on Thurrock council, two in Harlow, two in Rushmoor and one in Redditch. It will need a strong showing in each given that the upcoming EU referendum and ongoing migration crises mean their defining issues should have relatively high salience. If UKIP cannot gain council seats during a period when other populist and anti-EU parties are gaining ground across Europe then there must be serious doubts about its long term political competitiveness.

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