

2024: THE YEAR OF THE LONG CAMPAIGN

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PLMR
communications + impact

Foreword



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It's election year and the stage is – almost – set.

A mere 16 months have passed since Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister. Within the year, the fate of his party will be determined by his leadership and the five pledges he emphatically laid out in January 2023, when he declared that "you can hold me to account directly for whether [they are] delivered". The electorate will indeed judge him on that.

But they will also vote based on his party's record in office since 2010, the first five years as lead partners in a Coalition with the Liberal Democrats. The key question for most voters will be whether Sunak can turn around not just his own sluggish premiership but deliver on his publicly stated priorities to persuade the British public that the Conservatives deserve another go after 14 years in power. Few on the Conservative benches appear to truly believe the tide will turn. More live in hope that "something will come up".

Meanwhile, Sir Keir Starmer has taken the Labour Party from the depths of a devastating 2019 election to 44% in today's polls. This mirrors the vote share that propelled the Conservatives to a commanding 80-seat majority in 2019.

For Sunak's five pledges, read Starmer's five missions. But questions remain over whether his messaging is really cutting through and whether people are genuinely convinced by Labour or just fed up with the alternative. It is enough to achieve eye-catching by-election wins simply by not being the incumbent party but General Elections are seldom won by those without a clear vision. As we approach polling day, there will surely be greater scrutiny of Labour's policy plans should they win power. While the SNP's decline north of the border opens up dozens of seats not in play 12 months ago, it remains to be seen whether Labour will be able to convince the large number of currently undecided voters that they have earned their vote.

In this PLMR Insights Paper, we delve into exclusive polling, examining the state and trajectory of both political parties, and put the spotlight on key sectors that will be key battlegrounds in this longest of campaigns.



2024: the year of the long campaign – it's all to play for



SIMON DARBY

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To kick off 2024, PLMR commissioned Savanta to poll the public and gain an insight into the views and perspectives of voters as we head into the long campaign.

Overall, the findings paint a picture of the election being Labour's to lose but hints that there is still plenty to play for.

As the results set out below highlight, whilst Labour hold a lead, significant swathes of voters are yet to decide how they will vote, whilst many individuals are open to changing their mind regarding their voting intention as policy platforms are developed.

With an election expected in autumn, our findings highlight that voter support is up for grabs across large parts of the electorate.

- **A significant portion of the electorate is undecided who they will vote for at the next General Election.** Overall, 38% of individuals polled stated they are yet to make up their minds. Female voters are slightly more undecided at the moment (42%) compared to men (34%).
- **Attracting the votes of younger demographics could be critical.** Younger voters are significantly more undecided on how they will cast their vote. 48% of 18-24 year olds, 53% of 25-34 year olds, and 50% of 35-44 year olds all stated that they were yet to make up their minds on their voting intention. Comparative figures for the 55-64 and 65+ demographics were 29% and 25%, respectively.
- **In addition to many voters being undecided, individuals are also open to changing their mind as the election campaign gets underway.** 38% of voters suggest their vote could be swayed between now and election day. Again, this is marginally higher for female voters (40%) than male voters (37%) as well as across younger voting demographics: 25-34 year olds (48%) and 35-44 year olds (42%).
- **Reflecting wider party polling trends, voter intention highlights challenges on the horizon for the Conservatives.** 41% of Conservative voters stated they would be open to changing their mind on how they voted, significantly more so than Labour voters (33%). Attracting the votes of Liberal Democrat voters could provide key to the outcome of the next election, with 44% of Lib Dem voters being open to changing their vote. Conservative voters are also more undecided on who they will vote for (37%) than Labour voters (30%).

- **Regional battlegrounds across the 'Red Wall' contain significant portions of undecided voters.** As the Conservatives fight to retain the gains made at the 2019 election, 44% of voters in the North East, 42% in the West Midlands, and 40% in the East Midlands are yet to decide which way they will cast their vote. London (47%) Northern Ireland (46%) currently host the highest proportions of undecided voters.

The broader context facing the Conservatives – trailing Labour by between 15% and 25% in the polls – clearly demonstrates the huge challenge the party faces in retaining power at the next election. Flanked by Reform UK in many 'Leave' voting Red Wall constituencies and facing growing opposition from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats in more traditional southern 'Blue Wall' seats, it is far from clear whether Sunak and the Conservative leadership can shift the dial on the current polling position they find themselves in.

However, as our findings demonstrate, the 2024 campaign – which is only in its very early stages – is far from over. Whichever party develops a 'retail offer' of policies to undecided voters – including tapping into the more open-minded appetite among younger voters, could well find itself rewarded come polling day.



What's in store for the Conservatives in 2024?



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Senior
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Rishi Sunak has had a busy six months. The Prime Minister has been desperately lurching from one re-launch to the next, hoping to find a formula that will finally reverse the decline in his and the party's fortunes. From the change candidate, to the continuity candidate – Sunak looks unsure about what he can offer the country. And the country seems to feel the same.

Since Sunak became PM, his leadership has been marked by a strategic shift towards more hardline stances, particularly on issues of immigration and national identity. Why? Because he faces the substantial challenge of needing to consolidate the party's base in the face of significant challenges on two fronts; the Labour Party and the Reform party, with close links to Nigel Farage.

The challenge is that Sunak, in the modern political age, cannot be all things to all people. The metropolitan tech bro persona is at odds with the immigration

On current polling, we could see a potential landslide victory for Labour akin to Tony Blair's in 1997.

hardliner intent on sending illegal immigrants to Rwanda. This scattergun approach to policy and presentation is indicative of a Prime Minister seeking to identify the wedge issues, particularly immigration, which the Conservatives hope will resonate with voters and counterbalance their current unpopularity.

On current polling, we could see a potential landslide victory for Labour akin to Tony Blair's in 1997. For the Conservatives, they are adopting a damage limitation approach, hoping to avoid total wipe-out and, somehow, creating a very slim, very narrow path to some sort of electoral victory.

To achieve that, Conservative strategists are targeting Farage-inclined Reform party voters, who currently make up about 8-10% of the electorate, to bolster their own support base. But fresh from new-found popularity on I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, Nigel Farage may be in no mood to help out the Conservatives as he did in 2019. In fact, he may feel the opposite and revel in the opportunity to be a thorn in the governing party's side through a resurgent Reform Party.

Critics argue that Sunak lacks a deep understanding of politics. Indeed, recent events have made his political antennae look untuned at best. To get ahead of the polls, Sunak needs to deliver a message with absolute clarity and let voters understand exactly what another five years of his leadership would look like.

Many of us Westminster-watchers will have marked 6th March in our diaries with a red marker pen. Budget day. This could be one of the most consequential Budgets in recent history as the Government seeks to make voters feel better off thanks to an improving economic outlook and potential tax cuts. Whether that's enough to move the dial after the chaos of recent years remains to be seen.

The fact that Conservative MPs are openly alluding to a leadership contest post-election tells you everything you need to know about their faith in the current direction. This leadership chatter is only exacerbating existing ideological divisions in the party and a disunited party rarely fares well at the polls.



Safety First: Navigating the Road to Victory



DAN BAYNES

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Labour has started 2024 in the ascendancy. An average poll lead of 18 points suggests that Keir Starmer could be preparing to enter Downing Street with a healthy majority to play with by the end of the year.

Starmer's team has a growing confidence as the experienced Whitehall operator Sue Gray has been embedded in as Chief of Staff, transition talks with senior civil servants have begun and the party's shiny new HQ has fully turned its attention to the task of overturning the worst electoral result Labour suffered since 1935.

Party figures have reiterated that Labour are planning to be ready for a general election in May, although they admit an Autumn date is the most likely option. Organisers are gearing up for a full force ground campaign in upcoming by-elections and fast progress has been made to carefully pick candidates for target seats who align with the Leadership's work ethic and centrist world view they believe is required to win across the country.



To kickstart the 2024 campaign, Starmer made an appeal to undecided voters and those feeling apathetic towards British politics, seeing this as the greatest threat to Labour's chances of success. This coincides with a new 24-page "campaigning bible" sent to candidates on the message of "Let's Get Britain's Future Back", setting out a more positive message on the "five missions" than previously has been the case.

Labour will continue the "safety first" approach which has been a core theme of Starmer's leadership so far. Messaging on crime, immigration, patriotism and a positive outlook on business will reflect this, as seen with two senior members of his team — Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves and Shadow Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds —attending the annual World Economic Forum in Davos. Labour's Business Conference on 1st February provided another opportunity to stress how much the party has changed its view on "wealth creation" since 2019, with a [new "partnership" framework](#) launched for how a Labour Government will work with the business community.

The party's transformation in Scotland could be critical to the strength of a future Labour administration and the party appears increasingly confident of challenging the Scottish National Party's (SNP's) dominance north of the border.

However, there remain vulnerabilities within the Labour ranks, a book published by Labour MP Jon Cruddas has suggested that Starmer "lacks a clear sense of purpose", whilst the party still faces tough questions around the specific policies and costings on how Labour will achieve their 5 Missions, the U-turn over "green" investment reaching £28 billion a year has suggested that splits have started to occur between the Leader's Office and Shadow Treasury.

Expectation management could also be the biggest challenge for the Labour Leader, as activists and MPs get overly excited by various polls suggesting a Conservative wipeout. Indeed, Labour's Campaign Director, Morgan McSweeney has gone out of his way to stress that even a poll lead of 20 points can quickly disappear in the heat of a short campaign.

As the year goes on, the key question will remain the one we asked in our last [insights report in June 2023](#), can Labour and Keir Starmer seal the deal to return Labour to power?

Labour will continue the "safety first" approach which has been a core theme to Starmer's leadership so far.



Small Players, Big Impact: What lies ahead for the minor parties?



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Can Yousaf save the SNP from itself?

In 2019, the SNP under Nicola Sturgeon dominated the election north of the border, securing 48 out of 59 Scottish seats. Riding on this success, the party asserted a clear mandate for a Scottish independence referendum, however, the subsequent story has been marked by turmoil and uncertainty.

A series of significant events in 2023, including the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon in February, financial investigations, arrests, a decline in popularity, internal conflicts, and the election of Hamza Yousaf as the new party leader, have collectively contributed to a challenging year for the leading party in Scotland.

Yousaf will hope that the new year will bring new fortunes for the party, but the road to recovery appears steep. His strategy will see him continue to blame Brexit for the state of the Scottish economy and assert that only his party will ensure Scotland's voice is heard at Westminster. Additionally, he will continue to use the SNP's dominant result in 2019, which included coming second in every Tory-held seat, to argue that they are the only party that can create a Tory-free Scotland.

However, despite these efforts, the outlook for the SNP in 2024 is ominous. The ongoing investigations into the party's finances will continue to erode public trust and put its spokespeople under the microscope. Opinion polls continue to indicate a resurgent Scottish Labour Party under Anas Sarwar, exemplified by the 20.4% swing to Labour in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election in October 2023.

Even if the party does come out as the majority party at the next election, a reduction in the number of seats will destroy the strength of their calls for an independence referendum.



Lib Dems in Westminster: Scars of the Past, Hopes for the Future

Since their days in government and their collapse in popularity, largely caused by their part in supporting austerity and tripling tuition fees, the Liberal Democrats have long been overlooked in Westminster. However, whilst to a great extent, they remain on the fringes, they could have a huge impact in the upcoming general election and could very well become the crucial "kingmakers" who shape the political landscape.

The Lib Dems are continuing their strategic long campaign, positioning themselves to challenge the "Blue Wall" which they see as the key area where they can make the most progress, particularly by spotlighting the Government's track record on the NHS and the increase in mortgage costs —issues they consider especially pertinent to the local electorate.

However, the Post Office Horizon scandal has placed their leader, Sir Ed Davey, who was Minister for Postal Affairs at the time of the wrongful convictions firmly in the hot seat and in a precarious position. Perhaps wary of the fallout from Nick Clegg's infamous "sorry speech," his refusal to apologise, has led to further criticism and the Conservatives have only been too happy to seize the opportunity to distance themselves from the scandal and throw him under the bus. The revelation that he declined to meet campaigning sub-postmasters has only added fuel to the fire.

While the Horizon scandal has undoubtedly dented their popularity, it is unlikely to diminish their potential role as the key to unlocking a door to a Labour Government, should they fall short of a majority. Given the fallout from the previous coalition government, a formal partnership with the Labour Party remains highly improbable. However, if circumstances align, the Lib Dems might find themselves in a situation where they agree to support a Labour Government through a confidence and supply agreement.

As the political scene unfolds, the Liberal Democrats stand at the crossroads of opportunity and challenge. The scars from their past linger, but the potential for a political comeback and a pivotal role in the upcoming election adds an intriguing twist to their narrative.



Resurgence of Reform UK: A Political Shake-Up

The most recent polls put Reform on 12%, their highest level of public support so far, marking a considerable surge at the expense of the Conservatives. In 2019, Farage (who remains the majority shareholder of Reform) agreed not to contest the 317 seats won by the Conservatives in 2017, however, the same agreement has been ruled out by the party's leader, Richard Tice.

Reform not only has its highest polling to date but also has widespread support throughout the country. Should it choose to target certain constituencies, such as that of former Conservative Party Chairman Lee Anderson, Reform could win seats in a general election, but its most significant impact will be in splitting the right-wing vote and drawing away thousands of voters from Conservative candidates in seats it can't win. And therefore helping Labour pick up the seats.

The party's platform, centred around issues including lower taxation, public sector and energy reform, zero tolerance for crime and illegal immigration, has resonated with voters, contributing to its growing appeal and it could swell further should Farage return as leader. Whilst Farage has said he would not join the Conservatives... under Rishi Sunak... he has repeatedly said that 'timing is everything' so may still have his eye on a return to the campaign trail should he spot an appropriate and favourable opportunity.

Whilst it's difficult to predict how far its record high polling will transition into votes in a general election, Reform undoubtably poses a substantial threat to the Conservatives and will only incentivise the Government to ensure their Rwanda plan 'takes off' before they call an election.

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Education Lookahead



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With families desperately trying to get their children into the right setting at any age and a generally Labour-leaning education workforce, Labour may find they're pushing at open voter doors on any of the issues for which they can offer promising solutions.

Early Years

The sector remains in crisis due to severe workforce shortages and chronic funding shortfalls. This means nurseries across the country are continuing to close, limiting parents' access to provision.

From September, the underfunded childcare entitlement in England will begin to be extended to more children. The resulting increase in demand will increase pressure. There will be a welcomed focus on the workforce when the Department for Education (DfE) launches its impending recruitment campaign, but will it be too little too late?

From Labour, we can expect to see the outcome of their full early years review led by Sir David Bell, which should shed light on what Labour would do to support families with the cost of childcare.

Schools

Schools are competing for staff and pupils, with an ongoing workforce crisis and a drop in birth rates hitting primary schools (and their budgets).

Meanwhile, decreasing attendance and persistent absence are rightfully garnering attention from both the Government and Labour, with recent announcements from both sides focused on getting all children back into attending school daily as an urgent matter. Expect politicians to keep highlighting this throughout the year.

Schools and families are also desperately waiting for both parties to share any detailed plans – and, crucially, timescales – to fix the broken special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system.

Independent schools, and their families, will also be figuring out what to do if Labour comes to power and removes the VAT exemption.

Further Education

The Government's ongoing consultation into its flagship Advanced British Standard qualification will close in mid-March. Scepticism surrounding its practicalities may mean the DfE's subsequent response may take some time.

A shorter-term issue is that of the Level 3 qualifications review, which continues despite vocal criticism from across the sector. A number of technical and vocational qualifications that 'overlap' with T Levels will have their funding 'turned off' by the DfE in August, with more to come a year later.

Another issue to bookmark in 2024 is the Apprenticeship Levy, with both the Conservatives and Labour touting reform.

Higher Education

After dropping former leader Jeremy Corbyn's pledge to remove fees for all students, Labour leadership indicated they intend to reform the current scheme to deliver a progressive system in which low and middle earners repay less, but universities and families await detail.

The Government's much-heralded Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill gained royal assent in 2023. Because campus speakers have become a political football, we could see the Government and the Office for Students keen to show proactivity and taking action.

Lifelong learning entitlements also got the parliamentary greenlight in 2023, so 2024 will be the year for providers to get their courses set up ahead of the 2025 rollout.

Edtech

Leaders will increasingly explore how students may be using AI to complete their work (whether they're technically allowed to use it or not!) and how it can support with reducing staff workload.

All eyes will also be on how an increasing interest in digital exams will affect schools, colleges, exam boards and, of course, students.

Powering 2024: An energy lookahead



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Q4 2023 saw a flurry of policies impacting the energy sector, including the Energy Act, the Connections Action Plan, the Future Homes Standards and many more.

Much of 2024 will therefore focus on refining these already announced policies rather than defining new ones. For the energy sector, this means feeding into relevant consultations, workshops, engaging with officials, and undertaking the detailed legwork involved with making policy ideas workable on the ground.

One vital policy which did not see the light of day during 2023 is the Review of Energy Market Arrangements (REMA). However, it is likely that the more expansive proposals within REMA will be too controversial, and require too much legislation, to be a priority during election year. Expect the Government to therefore consult only on non-controversial parts of the proposal this year. Either way, appetite for radical reform, such as hyper-localised pricing, is receding given complexities, the desire for investor certainty, and the necessity to act fast to meet 2030/2035 clean power targets.

An early casualty in 2024 has been Labour's Green Prosperity Plan (GPP) – a flagship commitment to spend £28 billion per year on green investment. However, despite the U-Turn, the areas where expenditure had already been allocated remain live, including a £7.3bn

National Wealth Fund to decarbonise industry, and £8.3bn for GB Energy to invest alongside the private sector in less mature renewables as well as scaling up established technologies. The ever-thorny policy challenge of insulating homes has, though, seen a scale back in ambition.

Also still in place is Labour's ambitious 2030 clean power target, which will require considerable effort this year to ensure a fast start should Labour win. Helpful suggestions from expert organisations on how to practically reach this target without additional public expenditure are therefore welcomed, with upgrading the grid a clear and necessary priority regardless of the election result.

Whilst the Conservatives are unlikely to form the next government, they will still influence the debate. Net zero is seen by Rishi Sunak as a potential electoral dividing line, despite mixed polling data to back this, but the wedge has also

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been driven internally, including the Kingswood by-election triggered by Chris Skidmore's resignation over the bill to mandate annual oil and gas licensing. Sunak's net zero retreat is couched in 'pragmatism', but expect the more radical right to put this especially high on their campaign agendas this year, as an expanded front in the culture wars.

Given Labour's majority is not assured, the Liberal Democrats should not be overlooked. The party is tackling the 'blue wall' in part through an anti-development narrative in rural seats, which could impact support for local renewables projects, despite historically strong environmental policies.

Beyond the election, one of the most important developments in 2024 will be changing energy governance arrangements, in particular the development of the Future Systems Operator, but also Ofgem's updated net zero remit. Live consultations also seek to bottom out crucial issues such as the future role of hydrogen, whether new residential buildings will require mandatory solar panels, and how the Government intends to support greener transport fuels such as sustainable aviation fuel.

In short, whilst 2024 may be dominated by the election, the fast pace of energy policy means there is so much more for organisations to engage upon across the board in this fascinating sector.



Housing and Built Environment



**LAUREN
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The built environment and planning sector is a heavily politicised sector and changes in political leadership, both at a local and national level can have huge implications for the delivery of housing and infrastructure. So, as we look forward to 2024, the timing of the proposed general election, and the local elections in May will no doubt bring the winds of change. Promising a turbulent year for the sector.

The Conservatives have, for lack of a better word, failed to stabilise the planning system and deliver the housing promised. This in turn has a knock-on effect to local level decision making. It is widely acknowledged that radical reform is needed to the planning system to catalyse housing delivery and in turn drive infrastructure delivery and wider economic growth across the country. The recent changes to the National Planning Policy Framework delivered in December 2024 by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities seeks to speed up housing delivery, but there is much scepticism as to whether the changes really go far enough to deliver a marked improvement.

As it continues to build its messaging to the sector, Labour has been making bold statements with regards to speeding up the planning system and the delivery of housing. At PLMR's recent

event with Shadow Minister for Housing and Planning, Matthew Pennycook, we heard about Labour's ambitious plans to catalyse the system, with promises repeated from Labour Party Conference about the delivery of one million homes over Labour's leadership term. The sector however would be forgiven for being cautious over believing the promises made over lofty delivery rates, given that we have been stung before.

There is no doubt that should Labour be successful in its bid to win the next general election, the sector will see some changes to Planning Policy and hopefully in turn delivery rates. However, should the Conservatives maintain control, pressure on the Party to deliver tangible change will continue to mount.

Radical reform is needed to the planning system to catalyse housing delivery and in turn drive infrastructure delivery and wider economic growth across the country.

So, how much of an impact a general election will have on the built environment sector in 2024 is down to timing. An election in May, as being pushed by Labour, would clearly allow more time for some amends to be made quickly, planting the seeds of change for later in 2024. Should it be in the Autumn, as floated by the PM, and perhaps the more likely suggestion, the chances of this having a real impact in 2024 is unlikely, if not impossible.

What we do know with absolute certainty though, is that there will be local elections taking place for 107 local Councils on 2 May 2024, which will, as always, form an interesting battleground. In addition, Combined Authority elections in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley and the West Midlands, and the Greater London Authority Mayoral and Assembly elections will also be taking place.

As is almost always the case, given the political 'hot potato' issue that planning and development is, politicking and campaigning over contentious development proposals will almost certainly feature front and centre in local election campaigns. We have seen this have influence over the years, with the Lib Dems gaining ground in historic Conservative strongholds on an anti-development rhetoric. Something which is no doubt set to continue.

PLMR will be keeping a close eye on all of the political developments and continuing discussions with key players of all colours of the political spectrum, as the certainty of the result is never set in stone. It feels like the seeds of change are afoot and maybe, just maybe, there is going to be some tangible improvements to the planning system in the near future... but I certainly won't be holding my breath.



Tech Trends 2024: Navigating Regulatory Shifts, Investments, and Political Dynamics



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Regulation and investment will continue to be the key themes for the tech sector in 2024, with several policy changes enacted last year which the industry can expect to start seeing the results of.

In the Autumn Statement, the Government stressed the importance of the tech sector to the future of the British economy. It announced that, over the next two years, they will be investing £500 million into AI compute. This will bring the total planned investment to £1.5 billion and will provide scientists, researchers, and AI startups with access to the computing power needed to advance world-leading development.

In October, the long-anticipated Online Safety Act was ratified. By imposing extensive responsibilities on tech companies, the Government aims to establish the UK as "the safest place in the world to be online". The legislation holds companies accountable for user safety on their platforms, mandating them to implement appropriate measures to address and control the potential risks stemming from online content. As Ofcom brings the Act to life in 2024, the industry will need to have a renewed focus, with new investment, on online safety tools, practices and systems.

Rishi Sunak has branded himself as an avid supporter of the industry, with a current focus on monitoring existential threats posed by AI. Indeed, last year's AI Safety Summit, provided the UK with a platform to participate actively in the global discourse of this technology.

Despite a focus on AI safety, an AI Bill has not yet been brought forward by the Government. This is, however, with the exception of the Private Members' Bill 'Artificial Intelligence (Regulation) Bill'. Regarding the Government's plan for a future AI Bill, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Michelle Donelan, explained that the Government must understand "the full capabilities of this technology" before proper legislation can be brought forward. Nevertheless, while policy makers grapple with understanding the potential of AI, the discourse on regulation will continue for the industry this year and beyond.

By imposing extensive responsibilities on tech companies, the Government aims to establish the UK as "the safest place in the world to be online".

With the next general election around the corner, tech companies should also consider the implications of a potential change in government. If elected, Labour has already proposed measures to strictly regulate "frontier AI" developers, implementing security measures via new requirements around reporting, training models, and safety testing. This is coupled with Labour's pledge to establish a Regulatory Innovation Office aimed at establishing benchmarks for tech regulators, expediting regulatory decisions, and fostering economic advancement.

Labour has also promised ten-year research and development budgets and plans to work with schools and universities to equip young people with digital literacy, ensuring that these skills are embedded throughout children's learning. With a lack of new talent continuing to be a growing concern for the sector, Labour will set up Skills England, a body designed to focus on specialist training. This is alongside reforms to the Skills and Apprenticeship Levy, emphasising the training of young individuals to meet contemporary tech demands.



The next chapter in transport policy



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Transport policy will play an interesting role when it comes to the electoral politics of 2024. The General Election will not be won or lost on the basis of Labour's attitude towards trains or the Conservatives' approach to roads. This is despite the fact that transport will be a significant issue in many constituencies.

When the Prime Minister scrapped parts of HS2 last Autumn and redirected the money to a slate of new projects it opened the door to Conservative candidates across the north (and beyond) to boast on the campaign trail this year that they had secured funding for a new station in the constituency or a new local bus route. Their opponents will scoff at this, pointing out how little substance there is behind 'Network North'. Meanwhile some local candidates will revel in the demise of HS2 whilst others will mourn it.

But whilst these provincial skirmishes will be important, they are unlikely to translate into a major national battle. The two main parties are far too cautious about spending commitments to get into an arm wrestle. Previous dividing lines, such as renationalisation of the railways, have melted away in the face of post-pandemic realities. There isn't enough cash for big pledges to build roads, and when it comes to rail we can expect firm commitments to electrification schemes and to major projects like Northern Powerhouse Rail "in full" without many details or timelines. And neither party has a huge amount to say about aviation and shipping.

In the local elections, however, transport will play a much more pivotal role, particularly in the Mayoral contests. In London, the Conservatives have sometimes said that they want the contest to be a referendum on the Ultra Low Emission Zone. Sadiq Khan will come under fire for botching the expansion of the scheme, and more generally for the performance of Transport for London on his watch.

In Manchester, the Mayor will talk a lot about the Bee Network and his plans for Piccadilly Station; in Leeds, it will be the proposed tram and rail links to Bradford and beyond; and in Birmingham Andy Street will trumpet the improvements and investments linked to the rump of HS2. Mayors elsewhere will talk about their concerns and dreams about transport policy too. And candidates for local councils all over the country will debate potholes, bus routes, parking and traffic calming.

Once the elections are over, all eyes will be on what happens next. Will the pledges and pleas made during local, regional and national campaigns turn into reality? Will projects postponed under the Conservatives be resurrected if Labour wins? How will the ways we get around have to change if we're going to achieve net zero? We can be confident that transport will never be the most important political issue, but it will definitely be on the agenda during the years ahead.

Healthcare on the ballot: navigating the challenges of 2024



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The Health and Care system will face significant challenges in 2024. Beset by strikes, financial challenges, a rising waiting list and elective backlog, and growing patient demand across all parts of the system.

For only the second time in 15 years, the Treasury blocked the publication of NHS Planning Guidance due to the impact of strikes and financial deficits. Strikes are creating a tangible impact on patient care and outcomes, with a range of Trusts in recent weeks announcing critical incidents. Integrated care systems are facing a 30% reduction in running costs, and raise three consistent barriers to progress: staff shortages; NHS funding; and social care funding.

These issues are not new and are – in part – a legacy of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public satisfaction with the NHS is at a 25-year low, and over half of the public (according to Ipsos Mori) think that the standard of care in the NHS will get worse this year. It is therefore hardly surprising that the population view it as a priority policy area for the next 12 months.

The state of the NHS, and the plans for reform and improvement will feature heavily in the upcoming general election. Both main political parties have the NHS as one of their five policy planks.

The Conservatives have launched the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan to tackle the significant workforce issues faced in the health and care system, alongside increasing investment in the NHS by £33.9 billion in 2023/24, and providing funding and support to Primary Care to deliver 50 million extra GP appointments per year.

While Labour's full policy platform will be unveiled in the coming months, it has already made clear its priorities for the health and care system. Under its mission of building 'an NHS fit for the future', Labour's plan is centred around community-based care; shaping a workforce for the future with the technology they need to succeed; and focussing on prevention.

Of particular interest will be the plans for supporting innovation, including Labour's plan for procurement, adoption and spread, as well as reforming the incentive structures for the adoption of technology – perennial problems for technology providers to the NHS.

Similarly, Labour's plans to make it easier to conduct life-saving research through clinical trials will be a key area of interest for life sciences clients.

However, depending on the date of the election, any new government may find it is limited to what it can do in its first 100 days in power. Structural challenges, ongoing difficulties with the elective backlog and strikes, as well as financial planning assumptions mean that it may be difficult for any government to step into 2025 with the ability to make immediate, strategic changes to the NHS.

In the meantime, PLMR will be working with the Government, the NHS, and its partner organisations to support our clients to deliver innovative technologies and treatments into the hands of patients across the country.

We are monitoring the latest developments with the Federated Data Platform and how it can be used to support better insights for the NHS. We are engaging with ICSs, the NHS, its arm's length bodies and other health bodies on an ongoing basis, and are assessing the impact of the changes at the centre of the NHS, and the impact it will have on engagement strategies for clients. And we are engaging on the delivery of key policy platforms, such as the Medical Technology Strategy and upcoming Innovation Funds to support the adoption and spread of technology in the NHS.



Social Care



**NATHAN
HOLLOW**

**Board
Director, Head
of Health and
Social Care,
Head of South
West**

What do Bury, Bolton, Brighton, Middlesbrough, Leicester, Kent, Stoke-on-Trent, Southampton, Somerset, Bradford, Cheshire East, Hampshire, Oxfordshire, Wakefield, Coventry, North Northamptonshire, and Peterborough all have in common?

These are the 17 Local Authorities in England that, in the last month alone, have either issued a serious warning about their financial position, requested a financial bailout from central government, or announced significant service cuts (including to social care services) despite planning to raise Council Tax by the maximum permitted 5% per annum. And those are just the ones I've read about; I'm sure there are others. Clearly, Councils right across England, run by every main political party, and spanning both rural and metropolitan areas, are all giving the same warnings.

Additionally, it has recently been announced that upper tier councils will receive an additional £500 million for children's and adult social care in 2024/25 and that lower tier districts will receive a boost of approximately £30-£40 million. Coupled with previous announcements, this increased available core funding by 7.5% compared to 2023/24. Whilst the most recent round of emergency funding is welcome – this again only papers over the cracks and does little to solve the long term financial problems that are being faced across the country.

Having been long ignored by the political class, the challenges facing local authorities is finally getting some attention. A cross-party group of MPs kicked off February by describing the situation as an "out-of-control financial crisis" and warned that, despite the Government's interventions, Council's still faced an annual £4bn shortfall. They concluded by noting that, "long-term reform is vitally needed. The funding model for local councils is broken".

The money Councils receive from central government underwent a real-terms cut of 40%.

The causes of this systemic local government funding crisis are clear. The money Councils receive from central government underwent a real-terms cut of 40% between 2010 and 2020. In return, Councils were permitted to keep more of the money they raised locally from residents and business rates, but this served only to further exacerbate the gap between the wealthy and deprived parts of the country. A 5% increase in Council Tax in Surrey raises £84 per household per year, while in Stoke it is just £52.

Deprived areas also experience the greatest demand for Council funded services, further piling pressure on already constrained budgets. Middlesbrough, for example, spends 83% of its annual budget on providing social care, largely driven by having three times the national average number of older people admitted to care homes each year, and three times the national average number of children placed on a child protection plan. So, whilst all Councils have felt the effects of a rapidly ageing population and an explosion in children's social care spending (children's home fees have doubled in the last five years), this impact has not been felt equally.

For his part, the Prime Minister has been quick to politicise the woes of certain Councils, most recently bankrupt Labour-run Nottingham, but he conveniently neglects to mention these same pressures are plaguing Conservative-run Councils too.

The impact of these local government financial pressures will be felt by every voter, regardless of if they use, or work in, social care services as councils look to fill their budget shortfalls by cutting services such as winter road gritting, bin collections, highway maintenance, libraries, homelessness services, and just about anything else that isn't legally mandated.

Over the course of 2024, politicians will be focused on the major issues that dominate opinion polls, including NHS pressures, tax cuts, inflation, and immigration. Meanwhile, social care, which is unlikely to get more than a passing mention, sits at the heart of all these debates as inflation continues to eat away at their budgets and drives up the cost of care by more than the headline rate.

Planned immigration reform, including introducing a limit on the number of dependents able to join overseas healthcare workers in the UK and increasing salary requirements, will only add to the sector's pressures. Social care services have relied on migrant workers to replace domestic ones over the past year, and yet still has more than 150,000 vacancies nationally and a 33% annual turnover rate.

Workforce – and addressing this vacancy and turnover challenge – should arguably have been the big theme of the year, particularly following the Government's recent announcement of a new care career pathway and new care qualification. Whilst welcomed after such a long wait, this plan is reliant on workers seeing care as a career and being willing to undertake improved training and meet higher standards. But with better training will come demands for higher pay, and, without increased fees, many providers will simply be unable to meet these demands or compete against other sectors, including NHS Healthcare Assistant roles.

Elsewhere, and with one eye on the general election and Labour's poll lead, there is much to like about Labour's plan to bolster employment rights in the care sector – but this is similarly only deliverable if providers have the money needed to pay sick leave and holiday pay, with many providers relying on Councils paying fees that can facilitate this investment in the care workforce.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether it is the current government's social care workforce plan or Labour's planned 'fair pay deal' for social care workers (a major policy commitment): these reforms cannot deliver real change until Councils have the long term funding needed for care providers of all stripes to deliver on them.

An ambitious East of England creates political opportunities



**TIM
MILLER**

**Managing
Director,
PLMR Genesis**

There's a real sense of excitement across the East of England for 2024. The post pandemic bounce back has seen strong investment, growth and innovation with the region continuing to punch above its weight. This makes it fertile ground for political parties to make inroads.

For years the solid blue on the East's political map seemed unbreakable. The only speck of red being the major constituency cities of Norwich South and Cambridge. But now Labour senses a real opportunity to take back 'safe seats' in Conservative heartlands.

Last year's by-election result in Mid Bedfordshire, held by the Conservatives since 1931, saw Labour overturn a near 25,000 majority. This was a real game changing moment. It's bolstered Labour's ambitions in other rural constituencies across the region which were previously seen as unwinnable.

The Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Reform and other smaller parties will also be looking to make progress in winning over disillusioned Conservative supporters, but it's hard to see a sizeable sea change under the First Past The Post voting system. As a result, expect an increased political focus in the region in the run up to the next election. Political parties of all colours are going to have to rise to the challenge and set out a positive vision for the future if they want to make significant gains in the region which opens the door for businesses to shape manifesto commitments.

Labour senses a real opportunity to take back 'safe seats' in Conservative heartlands.

We do know that the political faces in the region are set to change. Former Health Secretary Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) and former Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Chloe Smith (Norwich North) are both standing down at the next election. Richard Bacon, who has served South Norfolk since 2001, will also be stepping aside.

So, what are the key policy battlegrounds for the year ahead?

The East is home to a thriving industry with a diverse business landscape from oil, gas, nuclear power, to renewables. Energy is a key Labour pledge with a commitment to reach zero-carbon electricity by 2030 and generate cleaner, cheaper energy through GB Energy. The Conservatives are arguing this isn't affordable and both parties are facing increased pressure to outline the viability on their plans in the more challenging economic landscape.

We're also seeing an increased focus on Health with the Government recently announcing three hospitals in the region are prioritised for rebuilding by 2030 to address concerns over RAAC. Whichever party wins the next election, the RAAC issue is going to be a hugely costly and complicated challenge. With the region's hospitals already under increased pressure, The Prime Minister's pledge to slash waiting lists will be another key battleground.

We also shouldn't overlook the importance of local issues. We've seen the Labour Party focus on farming with a commitment to boost the agricultural sector, improve food security and cut red tape whilst the Conservatives are seeking to win over rural businesses struggling with planning regulations with commitments to cut more red tape. Elsewhere the major cities from Cambridge, Colchester to Norwich are looking for a clear infrastructure plan.

These ambitions are matched with political expectation. The once safe rural Conservative seats feel more vulnerable and could be some of the key battlegrounds in the next election.



Election fever starts early in the West Midlands



**LEE
CORDEN**

**Director,
PLMR Advent**

Election fever starts early in the West Midlands this year. In May, voters across the region will elect a Mayor for only the third time in history. The incumbent, Andy Street, has a great deal of respect – certainly across the business community, but as a Conservative, faces an uphill battle for re-election.

His Labour challenger, Richard Parker, is a former PwC partner and was part of the professional team which created the West Midlands Combined Authority in 2017. His selection is an antidote to the arch-businessman Street.

Parker is also likely to benefit from a slight procedural change, which has removed the option of second preference votes. Whereas Andy has historically benefitted from being the Green and Lib Dems's second choice, he will have to win outright first time. With any other Conservative candidate, in any other circumstances, a Labour win would be a foregone conclusion.

However, Andy Street has done well to present himself as an 'arm's length Conservative' and has recently challenged the Government publicly over the cancellation of HS2. Meanwhile, the Labour Party in Birmingham (the region's largest local authority, and biggest share of votes) has imploded following the financial collapse of the council. Labour may face a real challenge encouraging its voters to turn out – in contrast to the national picture.

Elsewhere, Conservative gains made since 2017 will recede. In areas like Dudley, Walsall, and Coventry – all of which hold their own local elections in 2024 – Labour will expect to regain wards which had been won and held by the Conservatives.

With a slew of safe constituencies across the region, it is unlikely the national party will place too much confidence in local voting patterns, but there are key bell weather seats in the region up for grabs in a general election.

Nuneaton, currently held by Marcus Jones, is always well-contested. However, this year, seats like Rugby or West Bromwich West look achievable for Labour, something that would have been unthinkable two years ago.

With the conclusion of regional elections, local authorities and the Combined Authority will emerge with a refreshed mandate. Of course, until a new government is in place the current hiatus in activity at a local level will continue – particularly around local government finance.

For the national parties, the West Midlands – along with other combined authority areas – will be the first indication their election strategies are working.

Local Government/Devolution



**MARTIN
YARDLEY**

**Senior
Advisor**

2024: A make or break year for local government

2023 was a bad year for local government. The last twelve months has seen a worrying upward trend in councils issuing Section 114 notices – effectively declaring they can no longer balance their books. Birmingham has been the most high-profile with its financial woes being the result of a mishandling of both an historic equal pay claim and a £100 million IT project.

Nottingham City Council soon followed. Stoke-on-Trent, Hampshire, Middlesbrough, Somerset, Bradford, and Cheshire East have raised red flags. With different political persuasions, demographics, sizes, and demands – there has been no pattern.

Nearly one in five council leaders in England say they are likely to declare bankruptcy in the next 15 months. It's a sector-wide issue. The Government has announced a 6.5% increase in funding, but with inflation at consistently high levels, and increasing demand on services, this is not sufficient to allow councils to stand still.

Between 2010 and 2020 local government has already suffered a real terms cut of 40%. Local leaders are now talking of 'unpalatable decisions'. Perhaps more than any other area of public spending, this is where ordinary people feel cuts the most. It means fewer bin collections, fewer pothole repairs, fewer libraries, fewer social care places. It's the services people rely on and engage with every day.

The West Midlands and Greater Manchester have secured historic devolution deals. They will have exciting new powers as part of a single settlement agreement. Without doubt these present opportunities.

Whilst there are several new devolution deals in the pipeline, the pace has slowed in advance of a general election. This is in spite of bold policies for a suite of new unitary authorities across England as part of the Levelling-Up White Paper.

Labour has been less clear regarding its devolution position, but has proposed a 'take back control' bill offering councils a host of new powers – if they want them. Devolution will remain on the agenda.

Whilst welcomed by local leaders, new powers require new funding settlements and new resources. Devolution may be part of the long term path to sustainable finance. However, devolution alone cannot be the answer to the immediate crisis. 2024 could be make or break for councils and the critical services they deliver.

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