

RJF Briefing Paper 3

West Midlands council
elections 2012 – and why the
Greater Birmingham LEP is
watching them closely

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Contents

Introduction	2
Seats to watch:	3
Wolverhampton	4
Dudley	5
Coventry	5
Sandwell	6
Walsall	6
What could this mean for the Greater-Birmingham LEP?	7
Subscribe to RJF briefings	8
The Chamberlain Files	8
The RJF Public Affairs Daily	8
Contact details	8

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RJF Public Affairs was founded in Birmingham in 2011 by Marc Reeves, Kevin Johnson and Martin Field. It is the only consultancy of its kind to focus on the West Midlands, and it specialises in helping businesses improve their understanding of and relationships with the changing political structures in the region. We monitor activities within council chambers and other corridors of power, and help clients develop approaches to contribute to the positive development of policies which impact on the region.

Introduction

The results of the May 2012 elections for the West Midlands’ seven metropolitan councils will be watched keenly, not just in the local authorities themselves but on a region-wide basis. Nominations for strategic bodies – the Integrated Transport Authority, the Fire Authority, Police Authority, West Mids planning and housing committees – are made by the councils and are dependent upon which party is in control.

At the moment, the Conservative Party runs Solihull, Dudley, Walsall on its own and Birmingham in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Labour has control in Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Coventry. Therefore, the Conservative Party just manages to command a majority on most strategic bodies.

As the following analysis demonstrates, Labour may take control of Birmingham and Walsall following the May 2012 elections, effectively changing the political balance of the West Midlands.

When the probable results of neighbouring shire district councils are taken into account it is easy to see there may be implications for the Greater-Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership

Solihull

The Conservative Party regained control of Solihull in 2011, after a period of coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, and now enjoys a majority over all other parties of seven councillors.

Veteran Tory Ken Meeson is council leader and has been instrumental in helping negotiate with Birmingham Council the Birmingham-Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership.

Labour, with only six council seats, faces a mathematically impossible task because the way the 17 seats being contested fall this year gives the party the difficult task of attempting to overturn huge majorities in mainly Conservative-held wards.

It should be remembered, however, that Labour will be fighting for seats last contested in 2008, when the party performed badly off the back of national unpopularity.

Clearly, the most interesting battleground will involve the dynamic between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Both parties will be defending several marginal seats this year.

National opinion polls suggest support for the Conservative half of the national Tory-Lib Dem

government is holding up surprisingly well, and is either level with or slightly ahead of Labour.

Support for the Liberal Democrats, however, remains very low at about 12 to 14 per cent. Were these percentages to be replicated at a local level in May, the Conservatives could maintain power at Solihull without being forced to seek a coalition.

Seats to watch:

Elmdon

Lib Dem councillor Jean Hamilton won in 2011, with a 349-vote majority over the Conservative candidate. Labour did not field a candidate. This is a seat the Conservatives could win, were there to be a slump in Lib Dem support.

Lyndon

Lib Dem Ken Rushen won with a majority of under 600 last year in a straight two-way fight with the Tories. In 2012, Lib Dem Glenis Slater will be defending the seat she won in 2008 with a 221-vote majority over the Conservative candidate.

Olton

This turned out to be a highly marginal Lib Dem seat in 2011, held by Norman Davies with a majority of just under 200. Olton was safer for the Lib Dems in 2008 when Honor Cox won with a majority of more

than 700. Based on last year's result, a Conservative gain is possible here.

Blythe

Conservative Marion McCarthy is defending a 67-vote majority over Labour.

Chelmsley Wood

Labour's Alfred Hall defends a 64-vote majority over the Conservatives.

Shirley East

Lib Dem Sue Rose defends a 67-vote majority over Conservative.

Shirley South

Conservative Gary Allport defends a 57-vote majority over the Lib Dems.

Prediction:

Little likelihood of any significant threat to Tory control. Most of the interesting clashes involved Tory versus Lib Dem contests. The Conservative Party should maintain its overall majority largely at the expense of the Liberal Democrats.

Wolverhampton

Labour returned to power here in 2010, after a brief period of control by a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, which took power in 2008. Labour council leader Roger Lawrence

enjoys a majority over all other parties of 10 seats.

There are 35 Labour councillors, 22 Conservatives and three Liberal Democrats.

There are certainly opportunities for Labour to increase its majority, with the party contesting several marginal seats lost to the Conservatives in the 2008 rout.

These include:

Bilston North

Tory councillor Gillian Fellowes won with a slender 92 majority over Labour in 2008.

East Park

Tory Stephen Hall has a 334-vote majority over Labour.

Fallings Park

Tory councillor Peter Wilson is defending a 297-vote majority over Labour.

Heath Town

Tory councillor Margaret Findlay has a 159-vote majority over Labour

Oxley

Tory councillor Jenny Brewer has a 314-vote majority over Labour

It should be noted that Roger Lawrence, the Labour council leader, is by no means safe, having just held

on in 2008 with a majority of 153 votes over the Lib Dem candidate in St Peter's ward.

Prediction:

Expect Labour to increase overall majority.

Dudley

A Tory fortress, where there appears to be almost no chance of any change in May 2012. Council leader Les Jones enjoys a 14-seat majority over all other parties. There are 43 Conservative councillors, 28 Labour, One UKIP, and no Liberal Democrats.

Although a few Tory-held seats won during 2008 may be at risk, the party's overall majority in the council chamber should be safe enough.

Contests of interest include:

Brockmoor and Pensnett

Conservative Susan Greenaway scraped home with a 71-vote majority over Labour when these seats were last contested in 2008.

Netherton, Woodside and St Andrew's

Conservative John Davies won with a 30-vote majority over Labour in 2008.

St James's

Dudley's only Ukip councillor, Peter Davies, has a 200-vote majority over Labour.

Prediction:

Even a sharp swing to Labour is unlikely to destroy the Conservative majority in Dudley, given that only one-third of the 72 council seats are up for grabs.

Coventry

Labour council leader John Mutton enjoys a 16-seat majority over all other parties, and can expect to increase his stranglehold on power even further.

During the 2011 elections, Labour continued the pattern in place since 2010 of regaining seats lost to the Tories in 2008 when Coventry City Council shifted to Conservative control for the first time in more than 20 years. The party's extraordinary performance in 2008 brought a delighted David Cameron to Coventry, but the prime minister is unlikely to wish to repeat the visit after the 2012 election results are announced.

Wards to watch include the three-Ws – Westwood, Whoberley and Woodlands, all picked up by Labour last year, where the party is confident of a repeat performance in 2012. Labour will also expect to take Tory-held Bablake.

The 2012 contest should be enlivened by a feisty political debate about the prospect of Coventry Council being run by a directly-elected mayor. Coventry, in common with Birmingham, will hold a referendum on May 3, the same day as the council elections, asking people whether they would like a mayor.

Cllr Mutton, the Labour council leader, has led a vociferous campaign against elected mayors and has pitched himself against Coventry North-east Labour MP Bob Ainsworth, a former Defence Secretary, who is campaigning to become elected mayor.

Unlike Birmingham, where three high profile Labour mayoral candidates have emerged, Mr Ainsworth is the only Labour politician in Coventry so far to pitch for the job.

Prediction:

Labour should increase overall majority to at least 20 seats.

Sandwell

Labour's long domination of Sandwell Council shows no sign of diminishing, and could even grow stronger in 2012. The party has 60 of the 72 seats.

Prediction:

Given the size of the Labour majority, opportunities for huge gains are limited. The eight

Conservative councillors are defending core territory, but a swing against the coalition government could gift Labour even more seats in Sandwell.

Walsall

The Conservatives cling on to control in Walsall by the skin of their teeth. The Tory group is now neck and neck with Labour, both have 27 councillors. There are five Liberal Democrats and one Independent. Labour's position strengthened towards the end of 2011, with the party winning two by-elections in Bloxwich and Birchalls.

Walsall is a council that Labour will expect to take, and indeed must win in 2012 if the party is to move towards its goal of winning the 2015 General Election.

Nevertheless, Labour will be defending several marginal seats won in 2008. These include: Bentley and Darlaston North. Stan Madley has a 115-vote majority over the Conservatives.

Blakenhall

Ian Robertson has a 70-vote majority over the Conservatives

Darlaston South

Graham Wilkes has a 66-vote majority over the Conservatives

Pleck

Dennis Anson has a 91-vote majority over the Conservatives.

There are fewer Tory-held marginal up for grabs, the most obvious being Palfrey where Mohammed Munir won for the Conservatives in 2008, with a 134-vote majority over Labour.

Prediction:

A national swing should propel Labour to power, but the party does have to retain a worrying number of marginal seats. The Conservatives will feel that they can still hang on to power in Walsall, but the final result is likely to be very close.

What could this mean for the Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP?

Although private sector members make up the majority of the LEP board – nine private sector, seven councillors and one university representative – they owe their position to nomination and political agreement among the LEP’s councils.

The councils behind the LEP, with their political control, are: Birmingham (Con/Lib Dem), Solihull (Con), East Staffordshire (Con), Lichfield (Con), Tamworth (Con), Bromsgrove (Con), Cannock Chase (Lab), Redditch (Con), Wyre Forest (Con).

It can be clearly seen, therefore, that the political sentiment of the LEP’s sponsoring local authorities is

overwhelmingly Conservative. This may change after the May council elections.

The Conservatives have an overall majority of five seats on East Staffordshire Council, six seats on Tamworth Council, five seats on Redditch Council and six seats on Wyre Forest Council. Labour runs Cannock Chase Council from a minority position, but requires only four more to take outright control. Birmingham City Council is highly likely to change from Con-Lib Dem to Labour control.

It is possible that the LEP chairman, Andy Street, could become the biggest casualty of political change. Mr Street is chief executive of John Lewis and a Conservative Party activist. His “day job”, based in London, prompted some grumbling among Labour councillors in Birmingham, but his commitment to the Conservative Party may be an altogether more difficult pill to swallow.

The broad policy aims of the LEP are:

- **Increase Gross Value Added (GVA, a measure of economic output) by 30% (£8.25bn) by 2020**
- **Create 100,000 (net) private sector jobs by 2020**
- **Boost indigenous and inward investment**
- **Achieve global leadership in key sectors**

- **Build a world class workforce.**

These are unlikely to cause Labour-controlled councils any great problems. Change, if there is to be change, is more likely to be focused on concerns that Birmingham, with its proposed Enterprise Zones, stands to benefit rather more from the LEP than the shire district council members. This claim is strongly refuted by Birmingham, on the grounds that a vibrant and stronger Birmingham economy will create wealth and jobs in the outlying West Midlands travel to work area.

Clearly, the LEP's two leading members, Birmingham and Solihull, must be sensitive to the concerns of the smaller councils. It should not be forgotten that the perception of a "swaggering" Birmingham throwing its weight around prevented formation of a Birmingham-Solihull and Black Country LEP.

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