

Research briefing: Introducing the Shuttered Front

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Overview

In 2023, Power to Change published the High Street Warning Lights, a list of the 100 places in England with the greatest increase in persistent high street vacancy rate between 2015 and 2023. At the time, we identified 46 locations on that list that we thought were likely to be 'in play' at the coming election due to the electoral marginality of their corresponding parliamentary seats. Following a general election marked by major electoral shifts and the rise of Reform UK, which cemented its growth in the recent 2025 local elections, we revisit the High Street Warning Lights to explore how the state of the high street plays out in our politics.

The High Street Warning Lights are represented by 94 parliamentary constituencies following the 2023 boundary review. Our analysis indicates that while these seats performed similarly to the rest of England in the 2024 General Election in terms of both changes of political control and Labour's gains, Reform's second place performance in these areas was greater than in the rest of England to a statistically significant degree.

Furthermore, when taken together with the recent local election results, we can see that support for Reform is established or growing in 44 of the High Street Warning Lights areas. Should this growth of support for Reform persist, this 'Shuttered Front' – which consists of 39 parliamentary constituencies – could be a key electoral battleground at the next general election.

High streets are one of the most highly visible signs of local prosperity or decline and often serve as a proxy for broader economic and social challenges. These results support the body of research which finds that local decline is significantly associated with the rise of support for right-wing populist parties, including a [recent study](#) which suggests that visible local decline, particularly on the high street, was significantly associated with support for UKIP between 2009 and 2019. Therefore, a government looking to shore up its electoral

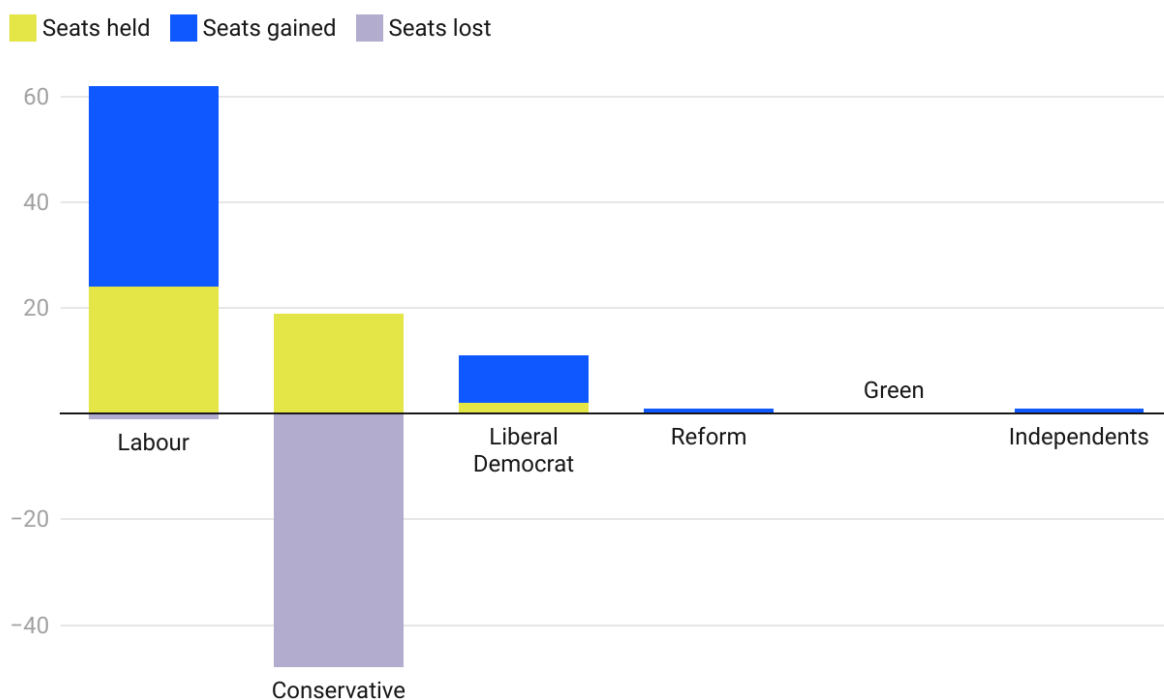
gains and respond to Reform UK's rising popularity should seek to turn the tide on our declining high streets by the next election.

This briefing presents the results of our new analysis, its implications for our current politics and outlines a package of reforms, through a Civic High Street Accelerator, that would put communities in the driving seat of high street renewal. This new approach would tackle the sense of disempowerment people feel over their everyday lives and the shortcomings of the top-down, prescriptive approaches which plagued the previous government's Levelling Up programme, both of which have driven widespread discontent with the political status quo.

Key findings

Are declining high streets more politically changeable than the rest of England?

Seats changing hands in the 100 High Street Warning Lights locations in the 2024 General Election



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See methodology for full breakdown.

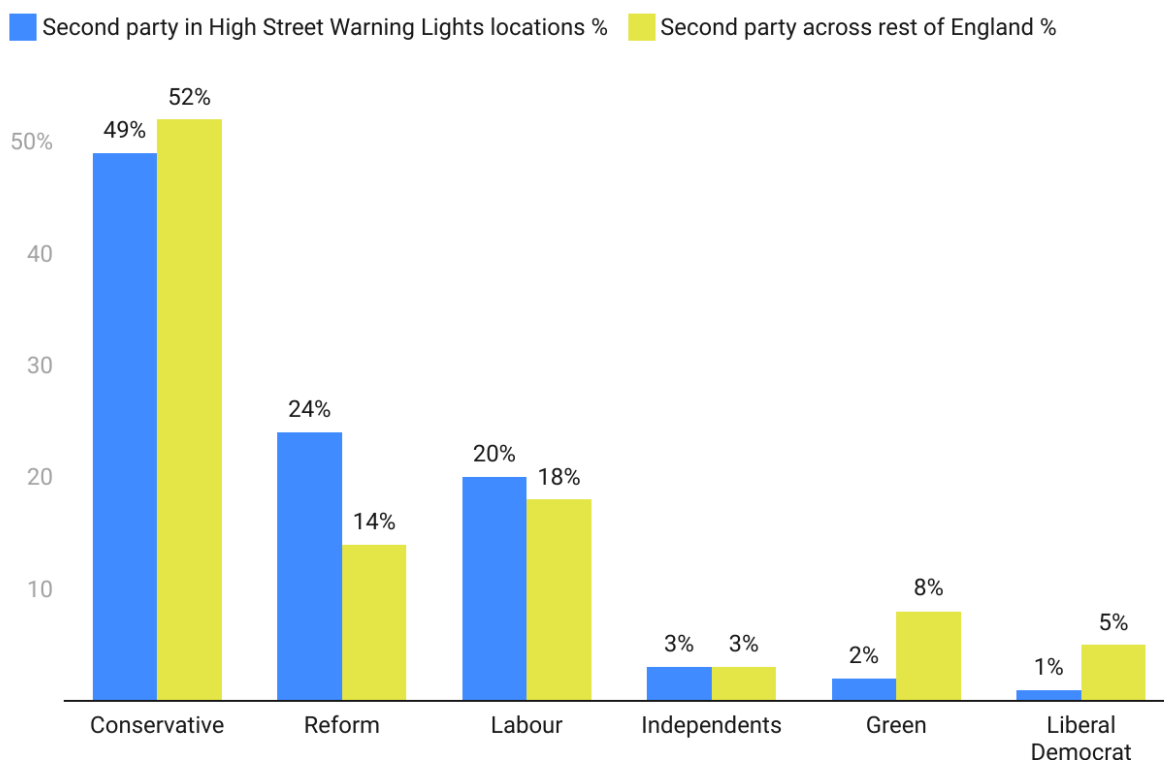


Forty nine (52%) of the constituencies that represent the High Street Warning Lights areas changed hands at the 2024 General Election, compared with 44% in the rest of England. However, this does not represent a statistically significant difference, so seats which have experienced the greatest increase in persistent high street vacancy do not appear to be more changeable than the rest of England.

The Conservatives were the second party in 46 of the seats in the High Street Warning Lights (49%) compared with 52% in the rest of England. This includes 40 seats that were previously held by the Conservatives and lost at this election.

Reform was the second party in 23 seats (24%), compared to 14% across the rest of England. This represents a statistically significant difference between Reform UK's second-place performance in the High Street Warning Lights relative to the rest of England – indicating that support for Reform is growing significantly in areas where the high street is in decline. In contrast, Reform's predecessor, the Brexit Party, came second in two seats in 2019 – both of which were held by Labour.

Proportion of second place finishes in High Street Warning Lights Locations compared to rest of England



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‘In play’ seats – changes in marginality

Of the 46 places we deemed ‘in play’ in 2023 (having a constituency margin of less than 10,000), 25 places saw a change of political control in their parliamentary seat in 2024 (across 21 seats – 19 gained by Labour and 2 by the Liberal Democrats). The Conservatives held just one of these ‘in play’ seats. In the places that we did not consider to be marginal in 2023, 28 parliamentary seats (54%) changed hands.

‘In play’ today?

Majorities are lower across the High Street Warning Lights in 2024, with 82 of the seats we analysed (87%) having a majority of less than 10,000. This reflects a decrease in majority sizes across England at the election, with the national average declining from 13,811 in 2019 to 7,156 in 2024.

When compared with the English national average majority at the 2024 general election (7,156), 65 of the seats in the High Street Warning Lights (69%) have a majority that is below average and 56 (60%) are in the bottom half of English constituencies by majority. The smallest majority in the High Street Warning Lights is Richard Holden’s majority of 20 in Basildon and Billericay and the largest is Tim Farron’s in Westmorland and Lonsdale at 21,472.

Local elections

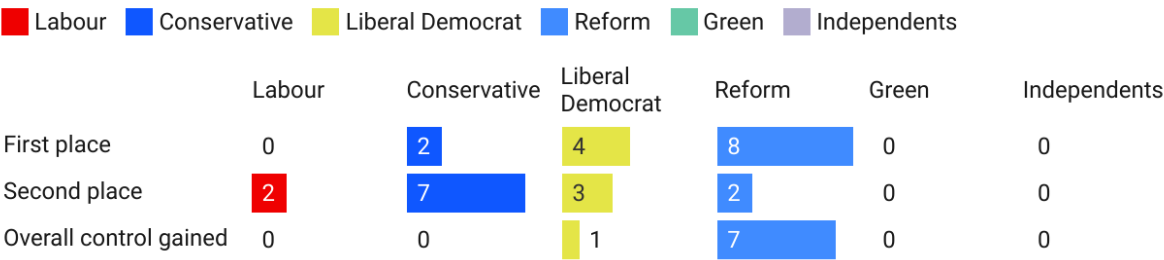
Twenty nine of the places in the High Street Warning Lights held local elections in 2025, across 14 county councils.

Reform gained control of seven councils across these areas (5 from the Conservatives, 1 from Labour and one from no overall control (NOC)), from a total of 10 councils gained across England.

Reform gained control of councils in four areas where the parliamentary seat was held by Labour or Conservatives at the general election – meaning three Labour MPs and one Conservative MP now have Reform-run councils in their area. The party gained a minority of council seats in a further four areas that the Conservatives held in the 2024 general election, all in Worcestershire.



Performance in High Streets Warning Lights locations in 2025 elections



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Introducing the Shuttered Front

Reform won a majority or minority of seats in local elections in the councils covering 17 of the High Street Warning Lights locations (across 7 councils and 15 parliamentary seats) where Reform did not place first or second in the 2024 general election. When combined with their performance in the General Election (seats in which Reform came first or second), this indicates that Reform has an established or growing political presence in 44 of the 100 High Street Warning Lights, across 39 parliamentary seats.

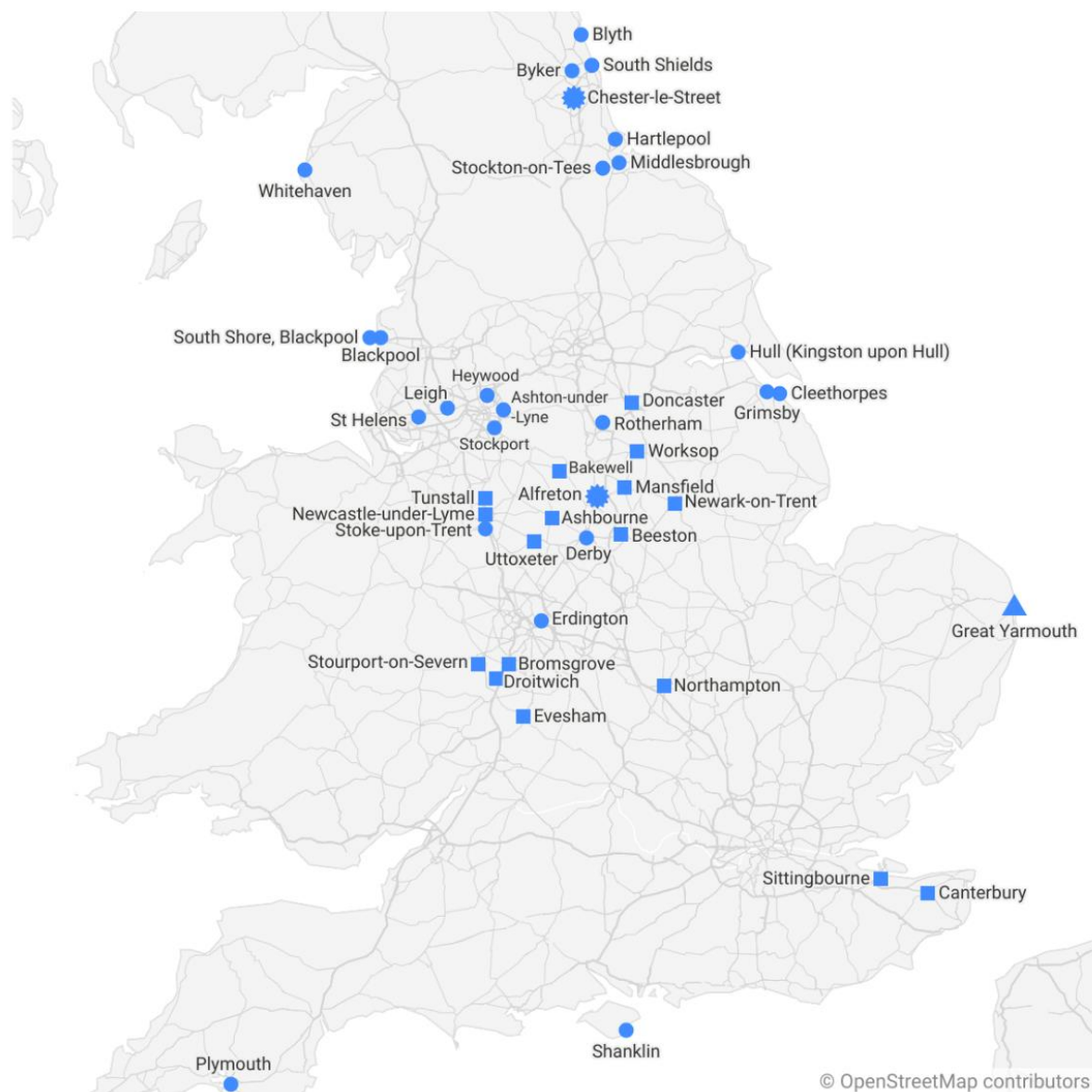
This growth in support for Reform could be seen as broadly reflective of the jump in the party’s popularity in the polls in recent months, and not necessarily the result of the decline of their high streets. Furthermore, without a complete set of local election results, it’s not possible to determine whether Reform’s local election performance in the High Street Warning Lights areas is significantly different to that in the rest of England.

However, when taking together the results of the general election and latest set of local elections, coupled with growing support for Reform in the polls, it is clear the party is enjoying an uptick in support in areas where the high street is in decline.

Should this growth of support for Reform persist, Labour could find itself defending more than 30 seats in this Shuttered Front, which may make it a key electoral battleground at the next general election.



The 'Shuttered Front': Reform's growing presence in 44 of the 100 High Streets Warning Lights



Key

- Reform in second place in 2024 general election
- Reform gain in 2025 local elections
- ★ Reform in second place in 2024 GE and gain in 2025 local election
- ▲ Reform seat gain in 2024 general election

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Implications

Why does the high street matter?

These results reflect a broader sense that Britain's high streets are in decline. In [polling by More in Common for Power to Change in December 2024](#), 73% of respondents said they think the state of their high street has gotten worse in recent years, with closing shops, empty and underused buildings and a lack of variety among the top reasons for this sense of decline.

High streets are one of the most highly visible signs of local prosperity or decline, and often serve as a proxy for broader economic and social challenges. These results support the body of research which finds that local decline is significantly associated with the rise of support for right-wing populist parties, including a [recent study](#) which suggests that visible local decline, particularly on the high street, was significantly associated with support for UKIP between 2009 and 2019.

Furthermore, these results suggest that policy initiatives to tackle high street and town centre decline by the previous government may not have been sufficiently effective as to change how people feel about their local area, which is reflected in how they voted. Twenty seven of the 100 towns in the High Street Warning Lights received Towns Fund or Future High Streets Fund investment as part of the Conservative Government's Levelling Up programme. This includes multiple places which received money from both funds, including Great Yarmouth, which elected its first Reform MP. Of these towns receiving Towns and Future High Street funding, only one seat was held by the Conservatives at the 2024 General Election.

What should the government do?

These results suggest an association between rising support for Reform and the decline of the high street, as a prominent symbol of local decline. So, a government looking to secure its electoral gains and respond to the rising popularity of Reform must take steps to meaningfully and visibly improve the state of the high street – as well as tackling the underlying social and economic issues the high street often represents – by the next election.

The Labour Government has already taken steps to introduce new powers to tackle high street vacancy through High Street Rental Auctions, which enable councils in England to force landlords to rent out long-term vacant high street property. The government has also committed to introduce a Community Right to Buy through the English Devolution Bill, which



will strengthen communities' rights to buy important local assets when they come up for sale – including on the high street.

The introduction of a Community Right to Buy represents a major step forward for community-led high street transformation. But to ensure that all communities can take advantage of this new power and transform their places, the government must implement a cohesive policy, funding and support framework for high street renewal.

Concentrating this package of changes at the hyperlocal level would put communities in the driving seat, tackling the sense of disempowerment people feel over their everyday lives and the shortcomings of the top-down, prescriptive approaches to high street renewal which plagued the previous government's Levelling Up programme, both of which have driven widespread discontent with the political status quo.

A **Civic High Streets Accelerator** would bring together a package of new powers, funding and support to enable community-led high street transformation. This package would include:

- **Powers to purchase and transform local high street assets**, including through the Community Right to Buy.
- **Funding for community-led transformation**, through a successor to the Community Ownership Fund, as well as through existing schemes like the Plan for Neighbourhoods and future local growth funds.
- **Access to expert support for community-led regeneration**, building on the expert advice provided by the High Street Taskforce with expertise in community-led high street regeneration and advice on exercising new powers such as the Community Right to Buy.
- **Opportunities for community-led governance**, building on insights from initiatives like Power to Change's Community Improvement District pilots and ongoing [Community-Led High Street Innovators work](#).
- **Support to boost communities' local economic contribution**, explicitly aiming to increase community ownership of high street assets to drive regeneration and keep money in the local economy, working with community business.



Methodology and sources

In 2025, we revisit data from the Local Data Company (LDC) on the 100 places in England with the biggest increases in persistent vacancy rate (percentage of properties vacant for more than three years) between 2015 to 2023 – which we termed the ‘High Street Warning Lights’. This was originally published in Power to Change’s report, [Community powered high streets](#) in 2023.

From this list of places, we identified the first and second party in 94 corresponding parliamentary seats at the 2024 general election and the size of the winning party’s majority using House of Commons Library data. We also identified first and second party and state of overall control for corresponding councils that held local elections in 2025.

Seat gains, holds and losses are as reported in the House of Commons data and were calculated relative to notional results for new boundaries, which estimate what the results of the 2019 election would have been if it had been held on 2024 boundaries.

Seat selection method

Locations as provided by the LDC in 2023 correspond to a geographic area rather than parliamentary constituencies, and so had to be mapped onto the 2024 constituency boundaries. Some places neatly map onto a single constituency, though others cross a number of constituencies (the largest number being nine seats covering Birmingham). Some constituencies are represented on the High Street Warning lights twice – such as Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Grimsby and Cleethorpes) and Derbyshire Dales (Bakewell and Ashbourne).

For those crossing multiple constituency boundaries, we selected a constituency of best fit by identifying clusters of high street and town centre retail – used here as a proxy for high streets. Using Google Maps to identify clusters of town centre retail in each location, a small sample of postcodes were recorded and checked against House of Commons data, and the constituency matching the greatest number of recorded postcodes was used. Generally, out of town retail centres were avoided unless the number of shopping centres in a town was too low to exclude them, as the LDC data refers to high street vacancy.

This method was difficult to apply in one location, Hackney. This is because London boroughs tend to have multiple smaller high streets, and large shopping destinations (like Oxford Street or the Westfield shopping malls) are visited from across the boroughs. In this case, the two potential matching constituencies (Hackney North and Stoke Newington and Hackney South and Shoreditch) both had Labour in first place, the Greens in second place and majorities well in excess of 10,000 (15,080 and 14,737 respectively). In this case, we adopted the slightly lower majority for the sake of calculating averages.



Statistical tests

Chi-squared tests were used to analyse the relationship between electoral results in the High Street Warning Lights constituencies and constituencies in the rest of England. All results use 5% significance level.

All tests are based on the results at the time of the General Election 2024 and do not account for changes in political control where MPs have subsequently changed their political affiliation (Great Yarmouth, Reform UK to Independent; Canterbury, Labour to Independent).

Data sources

Persistent vacancy rate (PVR) data from the original 2023 research was provided by the [Local Data Company](#) (now Retail Analytics Pro). We have utilised the 2023 data to understand how persistent high street vacancy played out in the subsequent general election. We have not compared this to PVR data for 2024 or 2025.

Results for the [General Election 2019](#) and [General Election 2024](#) are taken from the House of Commons Library. All recorded gains and holds reflect the boundary review which took place in 2023.

All local election results are for county councils. Election results are taken from the BBC's [coverage of local elections 2025 in England](#).

[High street polling](#) by More in Common for Power to Change was conducted 29 November-2 December 2024 with a sample of 2,002 British adults (excludes NI).

Data tables

Seat changes at 2024 General Election (High Street Warning Lights)

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Reform UK	Green	Independents
Seats held	24	19	2	0	0	0
Seats gained	38	0	9	1	0	1
Seats lost	1	48	0	0	0	0



Second place finishes

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Reform UK	Green	Independents	Total
High Street Warning Lights	19	46	1	23	2	3	94
Rest of England	80	232	24	62	37	14	449

Margins in 2024 General Election

	England		High Street Warning Lights
	2019	2024	2024
Mean	13,811	7,156	6191.34
Median	13,640	6,269	5545

For more information about the analysis, please contact:

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