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Makerfield

Dispatches from the by-election, and what voters want to see from Andy Burnham as Prime Minister



**More in
Common**

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About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank and research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public and helping people in Westminster to understand those voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. Our British Seven segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. We've published ground-breaking reports on a range of issues from climate and refugees to culture wars to crime. We are a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council.

Executive Summary

- **The intense attention focused on the by-election shaped the contest.** Voters described a sense of living at the "centre of the universe," with campaigners, celebrities and the media descending on Makerfield. People variously described choosing the next Prime Minister as a burden, a privilege, or simply an annoyance - but the upshot was an historically high turnout and unusually calculated tactical voting, with many voters treating their ballot as a choice of Prime Minister rather than MP for Makerfield alone.
- **Andy Burnham defied electoral gravity through his own personal brand and despite Labour's national unpopularity.** He faced two obstacles: the nature of the seat (a Brexit-voting Reform target) and the Labour Government's toxic national brand. Voters consistently praised him as personable and charismatic, contrasting him with Starmer whom they saw as out of touch and dishonest. Burnham successfully framed himself as a change candidate distinct from his own party, meaning even some Reform-minded voters came to see him as the surest route to deliver immediate change. His ability to deliver that change will shape the path to the next election.
- **Robert Kenyon polarised voters in Makerfield.** Many questioned his readiness for the job - citing a faltering Question Time performance - while others welcomed his inexperience as proof he was a genuine outsider rather than a career politician. His past misogynistic social media comments also did damage, splitting voters between those who dismissed them as "banter", those who questioned why he hadn't apologised and those who found them repulsive and disqualifying. Kenyon ultimately did more harm than good to Reform's chances by deterring some wavering voters and galvanising the anti-Reform vote.
- **Restore Britain's appeal has grown beyond social media.** The party is pulling together two distinct groups of voters: one which is highly online and wants a more radical, boundaryless version of Reform (embracing remigration, ethnonationalism and figures Farage has shunned, such as Tommy Robinson); and a wider group who think Reform has become too establishment - "Tories 2.0." In Makerfield, Rupert Lowe's party branched beyond their radical-right online base and reached more moderate voters who felt disillusioned with Reform.
- **Many liked the Conservative leader, but not the party:** Many voters in Makerfield liked Kemi Badenoch personally - she often got the most positivity of any party leader - and praised the local Conservative candidate Michael Winstanley. But either the party itself was seen as unviable in this race, or the brand still tainted after their 14 years in office.
- **"The Makerfield Test" had three key dimensions for voters: showing he gets it, a record of delivery, and a national vision.**
 - **Showing he gets it.** Voters wanted proof that Burnham genuinely understood and cared about people like them, drawn both from his record

championing Greater Manchester and from a personal sense of him as approachable and down-to-earth - repeatedly contrasted with a Starmer many saw as distant and out of touch.

- **Record of delivery.** Burnham's actual track record as Mayor was put under scrutiny, with voters weighing visible wins, like the Bee Network, against unresolved local frustrations such as policing and anti-social behaviour and the unpopular Clean Air Zone - testing whether his promises matched what he'd actually delivered.
- **National vision.** While some were wary of being used as a stepping stone, it's clear that Burnham's promise to reshape Westminster and provide a better deal for places like Macclesfield resonated. Voters now want clarity about what this 'Macclesfield Test' looks like in practice.

Chapter 1 - Living at the “centre of the universe”

Turnout at the 2026 Makerfield by-election hit 58.8 per cent, the second highest by-election turnout since 2000. By-election turnout in Britain is usually well below general election levels, with lower public engagement and campaign awareness. Makerfield bucked that trend: for the first time since 1987, turnout at the by-election exceeded turnout in the same constituency at the most recent general election - 6.4 per cent higher than in 2024. The last time the gap was *this wide* was the 1969 Mid Ulster by-election.

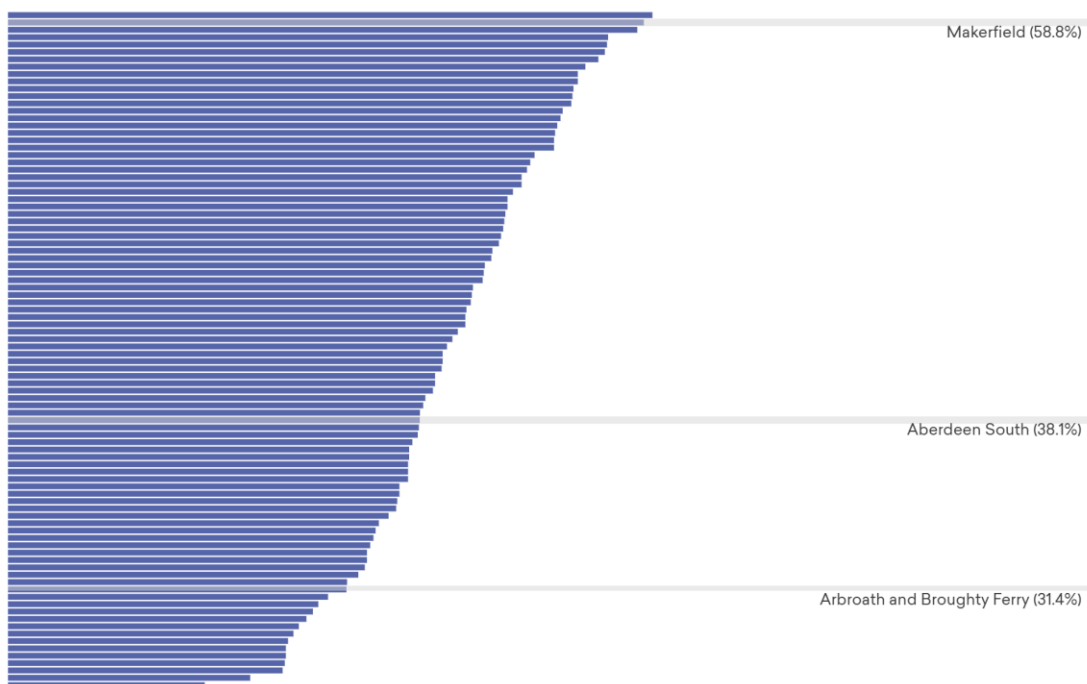
The high turnout was historic, but for anyone who conducted a focus group in the weeks leading up to the Makerfield by-election, it was not a surprise. At the centre of a national story, inundated with leaflets, canvassed by senior politicians and celebrities, and watched constantly by journalists, voters here were strikingly engaged. Many spoke of the immense weight of having the opportunity to elect the next Prime Minister. Some saw this as a privilege, others as a burden or simply an annoyance.

It is beyond doubt that the attention had an impact on voting behaviour: voters spoke of the complex calculations they were making, the tactical decisions, and the pressure they felt to make the most of this important opportunity.

“I feel like we are at the centre of the universe. My friend was having a coffee in Costa Coffee and she was approached by two German journalists, asking her opinion on the upcoming election. I said, ‘I didn’t know that it had reached as far as Europe’. So the Germans are interested in the outcome of this? And I do feel like we’re just at the really hyper centre of it, aren’t we? It’s like it’s a pressure and privilege at the same time.”

Anne, retired, Ashton

By-election turnout since 2000



Into the spotlight

The moment that Andy Burnham was confirmed as Labour's candidate, Makerfield was put in the national spotlight. Voters cited a constant media presence and regular contact from campaigners, describing mountains of leaflets and near-constant door-knocking.

"If I'd have been on holiday for the last two, maybe three weeks and then come home and try to get through the front door, I would not have been able to open it."

John, Engineer, Winstanley

"It's like that scene in Harry Potter. They keep coming in. Every day. I had six the other day, six. And I had something off almost all the parties in one go."

Alice, Architect, Hindley Green

"I'm finding it odd online that everybody from all over the world has got an opinion on our little area. It's really strange."

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

As the campaign progressed, the intensity increased further still with celebrity endorsements joining the mix of leaflets and canvassers. Several voters described receiving a personally addressed letter from Carol Vorderman, urging them not to vote for Reform's Robert Kenyon over historic misogynistic comments he had made online.

"I was shocked that I just got that letter because I don't see what it's got to do with Carol Vorderman, really."

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

Many described seeing international journalists and camera crews in the town centre. Online forums and Facebook community groups were flooded with debates - many from profiles that were not local, and with some voters suspecting they had been generated by bots.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before, because I work in Ashton, I'm coming to work every day. I'm seeing camera crews and they're from all over the world, not just local. So I think it's really exciting and it's historic and it's a chance for our little area to make a real difference."

Alison, Cake Maker, Ashton

"It sparked a lot of debate that we don't normally get online, on social media, which is interesting... What I've noticed more and more is a lot of people — let's call them bots, whether they're automated or not, I don't know — who just come on and post something about a person or a party without any kind of discussion... And when you look further, some of them are just profiles that have been created in the past few weeks."

John, Engineer, Winstanley

Many talked about their disappointment that the by-election was taking place when there was construction in the town centre, meaning it did not look its best. Others were frustrated by the Ashton-centric focus of the coverage, with politicians and media concentrating their time in Ashton-in-Makerfield and neglecting the surrounding villages.

"It's come at a very bad time for us because they're regenerating the town centre, so it's a right mess and it makes it look very bad."

Paula, Retired, Ashton

"I've not seen anybody here [in Hindley Green] at all. And there was an article in the Manchester Evening News last week saying the corner of Makerfield that's been forgotten about and it does very much feel like that."

Wendy, Finance Manager, Hindley Green

A common theme raised by voters was how much they had been impressed with Josh Simons. Simons had far greater cut through than any other 2024 intake MP in focus groups More in Common have conducted. He was a popular MP, and even those who said they did not vote for him reported that he was active and cared about the area. There was a sense that he was collateral damage in a wider political game and many expressed sadness that he was gone.

"I asked the question, why are we having this election? Because we had a perfectly good MP, Josh Simons. I mean, I didn't vote for him. He seemed to be doing a good job. He was always contacting the constituents. He was always in regular surgeries in the local pub near me."

Alan, Retired, Ashton

"I went to a meeting that he was at about trying to save the library and he came over as very interested and very caring, shall we say. Not like what you expect from an MP who gets voted in and you never see them again."

Louisa, Post Officer, Asthon

"He's very present. You see him doing things and he's often on Facebook where you see things that he's actually done and making posts about what he's trying to do."

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

A burden and a privilege

This by-election was unique in that it gave a single constituency a potentially decisive say in who would be the next Prime Minister, and residents were divided about whether this was a good thing for Makerfield.

“Because we had a Labour MP in a safe seat and we didn't need this circus. No one needed it. I don't think anyone wanted it.”

Georgia, Retired PCSO, Bryn

Some voters welcomed the opportunity to shape national politics. They felt it was an honour to have such a big say in the country's political future, and that having a Prime Minister represent their constituency would ensure positive change in Makerfield and the north of England more broadly.

“The way I see it, the last thing that any Prime Minister would want, of whichever colour, would be for their constituency to go downhill. I believe that the best thing for Makerfield would be to have whichever MP as Prime Minister.”

Daniel, Marketing Manager, Ashton

“I think for me it's also a privilege that we've been put in a privileged position to be able to make such a massive decision really.”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

“I think it's really empowering. I think we've got a huge decision to make in this constituency and it's got ramifications for the entire country probably for the next three years... We could potentially swing the balance.”

John, Engineer, Winstanley

Other voters were less positive about the prospect of having a Prime Minister as their MP: would Makerfield be neglected? Similarly, some voters felt that they were being used as part of a political game and that their area's problems were not being taken seriously as a result.

“Let Andy go off and do whatever he wants to down in London, become Prime Minister because his hands are going to be tied. He's going to totally have his time taken up in London. He won't have time to devote to Makerfield.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

“If he becomes Prime Minister, he's not going to have any time for the constituency and that's a big concern.”

Rachel, Housing Officer, Asthon

Playing 3D Chess

Voters in this election were uniquely engaged and understood what was at stake. Knowing that the race had profound national implications meant people did not vote as they would in a standard by-election. Instead, they described weighing consequences, running through scenarios, and feeling the personal toll of all that calculation – Rachel described a sense of “*turmoil*”, while Dave said he felt “*fatigued*” by the process.

Tactical voting was apparent on every side of the contest, and took some unusual forms. In its most extreme, and unusual case, Anne, a Starmer supporter who had voted Labour her entire life, said she was considering voting against Labour for the first time in order to keep Burnham out of Downing Street.

“It would be better to have Kenyon as MP than Burnham as PM. If we have a crap MP, it can go to the next election. If we have a crap prime minister, it's going to be a damn sight harder to get rid of him.”

Georgia, Retired PCSO Officer, Bryn

Meanwhile on the right, many who felt tempted by Restore Britain worried that Rupert Lowe’s party might split the vote and allow Burnham in. Many described tactically voting Reform.

“(Ruper Lowe) talks a lot of sense (...) but I worry Restore are going to be a spanner in the works.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

“I fully expected that the combined vote of Reform and Restore would beat Andy Burnham. Obviously I was wrong, but I prefer Restore and I only voted Reform because I didn't want to split the vote.”

Alice, Architect, Hindley Green

Across the political spectrum, voters said they planned to vote against, rather than for, a candidate and that this sat uneasily with them.

“I think it might be the first time I vote negatively. That sits really uncomfortably with me.”

Angela, Company Director, Orrel

“While I don't think Andy Burnham is the most wonderful person in the whole world, part of it is about who doesn't come into power as much as who does. And that's a big thing for me.”

Diane, Part-time Admin Officer, Orrel

Anne was ultimately part of a very small minority as tactical voting swung in Andy Burnham's favour. Like in the Caerphilly and Gorton and Denton by-elections, the anti-Reform vote coalesced behind one candidate. As explored in more detail below, Reform's choice of candidate may have galvanised the anti-Reform vote - many progressives saw Kenyon as a genuine threat, rather than just a bad candidate. While the left bloc did not grow significantly between 2024 and 2026, Labour's consolidation of this bloc was significant as the Greens and Liberal Democrats were squeezed below five per cent, while the right remained divided.

Chapter 2 - Perceptions of leaders

The scale of Andy Burnham's victory cannot be attributed to any warmth for the wider Labour Government: Keir Starmer is deeply unpopular in Makerfield. His net favourability is -45; by a margin of four to one, Makerfield residents are more likely to have a negative than a positive view of Starmer. Even among those who were planning to vote for Burnham in the by-election, Starmer's approval was still underwater.

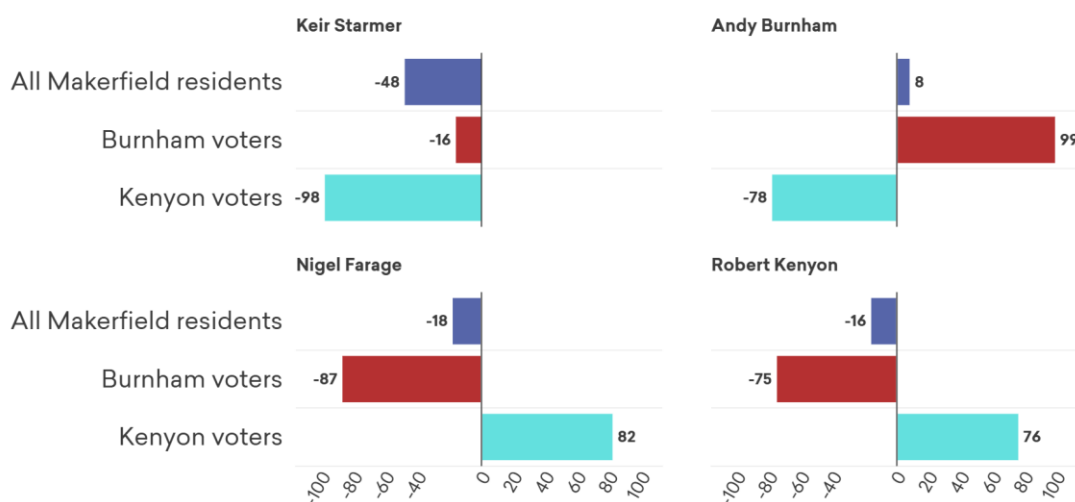
In contrast, Andy Burnham is among the few political figures with a positive approval rating (+18): 50 per cent of Makerfield residents hold a positive view of him, compared to 32 per cent who see him negatively.

In focus groups the two Labour figures are contrasted against one another: Keir Starmer is described as weak, out of touch and lacking empathy by left and right leaning voters alike; Andy Burnham has his detractors, but has a much larger base of supporters who see him as a strong voice for Greater Manchester, locally rooted and genuinely concerned about the issues facing Makerfield.

Meanwhile, both Nigel Farage and Rob Kenyon's net favourability ratings were underwater in Makerfield. Kenyon's net favourability rating among Labour voters was -76, worse than Burnham's -68 approval rating among Reform voters. In other words, anti-Kenyon hostility on the left was more intense than anti-Burnham hostility on the right.

Starmer has a negative net approval rating even among those intending to vote for Burnham

Net favourability of Labour and Reform candidates and party leaders among Makerfield residents



Andy Burnham

Andy Burnham's popularity was a decisive factor in this contest. Many contrasted him with Keir Starmer who they see as disconnected and out of touch. A key element of Burnham's popularity was his visibility: voters had often met him or worked with him on local projects, meaning they got to know him personally. More than once people described seeing Andy Burnham at the football, drinking, or shopping - away from the cameras. These incidents, where he appeared to let his guard down, had endeared many voters to Burnham.

"I think he's more charismatic [than Starmer]. I think he's also probably got between the two of them the most experience. I think he's more down to earth and he's got more idea of what is going on at the local level."

Laura, Retail Worker, Ashton

"I'm not a Labour fan at all, but I am a fan of Andy Burnham (...) He's very supportive about construction and getting new legislation through and helping the industry."

Alice, Architect, Hindley Green

"On Saturday (my husband) was at an event and Andy Burnham was there and they were playing football together, and then afterwards Andy got really quite drunk, but there was no cameras there. Some of his entourage were there, but ultimately they weren't doing anything. He went home drunk, but he'd been in a safe space where people weren't attacking him. And I just think that's nice - because I've seen him at Asda in Golborne shopping. There was no one there. There's no cameras. It's not for effect. He was literally doing his shopping."

Susan, Therapist, Ashton

"I've seen him at the football. I've seen him in the pub outside the football stadium just talking to fans. I know he'll buy people drinks. Comes across as an ordinary bloke who you'd actually want to speak to."

Ben, Engineer, Platt Bridge

On the other hand, the perception that Burnham saw Makerfield as a 'stepping stone' in his path to Downing Street cut through. Burnham's national ambitions clearly grated on some voters, who saw the by-election less as a genuine local contest and more as a vehicle for Burnham's career. Some felt that his ambition was a mark against an otherwise admirable local politician.

"It's quite a vanity project on behalf of Andy Burnham. Not that I dislike Andy Burnham - I think he's a very appealing personality really - but it just seems an obvious stepping stone"

Alice, Architect, Hindley Green

“As a human being, Andy Burnham is quite a decent guy, but put him in a political suit and he's absolutely dangerous. He's two-faced as well.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

“I think [Burnham] has really shown his true colours, just showing that he will trample over anyone and anything to achieve his ambitions. I just think that the only thing that he cares about is himself.”

Georgia, Retired PCSO Officer, Bryn

But above all else, the biggest obstacle in Burnham's path was his party: the Labour Government's dire approval ratings in Makerfield meant he focused on promoting the Burnham brand rather than his party's record in Government. Voters commented on how both campaigners on the doorstep and Burnham's election material rarely mentioned Labour.

“When we had Labour come to our house and well, I wouldn't have actually known it was Labour because there was no mention of the Labour Party. It was purely, are you voting for Andy? Not even Burnham. It was Andy, vote for Andy.”

Paul, Support Worker, Ashton

“Can I say that this is an asymmetrical election because Labour want you to vote for the personality of Andy Burnham and Reform want you to vote for the party of Reform.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

However, for some, dislike of the Labour Government was actually driving them to vote for Burnham, because they saw him as a channel through which they could see change *now*, rather than at the next election.

“I've never voted Labour in my life, but I did vote for him this time. I voted for him rather than Labour... I wanted something to change now. So I voted [for] him as a protest vote, it was a protest vote to influence change now for the country, and that's the way I looked at it. Now the change might be good, it might be bad, I don't know how that's going to go, but at least with him being in position, or potentially in position, it can impact some kind of change now - whereas if it had been Reform or some of the others, nothing would've changed. It could have stayed at the status quo the way it's been for the last two years with the government, and I didn't want that to happen.”

Alex, Machine Manufacturer, Ashton

Burnham's record in Greater Manchester was also frequently raised; voters were largely positive in their appraisal but with some critics. Some pointed to his record on homelessness and public transport as real delivery in a time when delivery from politicians

has been lacking, while others criticised the Clean Air Zone. As explored in more detail in Chapter 3, these debates about local issues were crucial.

“He's an overestimated underachiever, Andy Burnham. He's got credit for things like town centre regeneration. Well, he's not done that... it's not him that's done it. He's claimed the credit.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

“There really isn't a lot of love for him around here because of the clean air issue. A lot of people felt let down, especially those small businesses who would've had to upgrade their vehicles. And yeah, we just feel like he's let us down. But because of what the alternative is for me, again, I'm going to have a very reluctant vote.”

Wendy, Finance Manager, Hindley Green

Keir Starmer

While there was a split in opinion about Burnham, the same cannot be said for Keir Starmer. Bar some acknowledgement of his role on the international stage, voters almost universally disliked him. The criticisms of Keir Starmer broadly fell into three key strains: firstly, that he was weak, and as a result had given up on his principles and failed to deliver on the promises he made in 2024; secondly, that he was out of touch, and that under him the Labour Party has become disconnected from the working class; thirdly, that he was dishonest.

“He doesn't seem to know whether he's coming or going. I don't think he will resign. I think he has to be pushed because I think he's got on his own pedestal. So I don't think him as a leader is very good, but I don't think the Labour Party are terribly bad either. I think they just need a refresh.”

Laura, Retail Worker, Ashton

“I don't recognise this as a Labour Government because to me, they've just stolen the name because they don't represent any Labour values.”

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

“He tells lies. He is in his own little room in Number 10, he's not in the real world. I find every time he opens his mouth, it's another lie. The only thing that he's done is not joining with Israel and Trump.”

Melissa, Retired, Ashton

“Well, I think he's an absolute disaster. He's not got a clue. He's not got a political cell in his body. He doesn't know, he U-turns on everything. He's not a leader and his policies have been absolutely chaotic and disastrous.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

“I've known Andy a long time. He's a very pleasant guy to talk to outside of politics. He's down to earth, he talks to you man to man. He's far more charismatic, as you say, than Starmer will ever be. Starmer's dead, to be honest with you. He stands up and just... no personality whatsoever.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

Nearly two years on from the policy's announcement, it's striking how much the Winter Fuel Allowance decision still shapes how voters feel about Keir Starmer. For many, it crystallised all three of their core criticisms of him: that he is out of touch and lacks empathy for the public; that he is dishonest, willing to introduce policies that contradict manifesto promises; and that he is weak, with the policy only changing under pressure from his own party in an eventual U-turn.

“He's got a terrible reputation. The first thing he did when he came to power was take away the pensioners' winter allowance (...) he's not a leader... You want to put on the TV and be inspired by him, want to believe and go along with things – like the winter fuel allowance. There's a lot of promises he made, as they all do when campaigning, and then they go back on it, and winter fuel allowance – I know it's had a huge impact on a lot of people close to me.”

Carol, Prison Officer, Ashton

Robert Kenyon

While Burnham's party detracted from his popularity in this by-election, the opposite was true of Rob Kenyon. In focus groups, many pointed out that Kenyon's name was often omitted from Reform leaflets and banners, whereas Burnham's name was plastered across Labour materials.

There were two questions voters who otherwise might have backed Kenyon asked. The first focused on his lack of experience. Many wondered whether he was up to the job, and his performance in the Question Time debate – in which many thought he was nervous, unnecessarily combative and “out of his depth” – undermined confidence among some voters.

On the other hand, inexperience is not always seen as a negative – particularly by Reform voters who are fed up with the political class. Some voters were pleased to be able to vote for a local with a normal job, and contrasted him with Burnham who was seen as a career politician. Like Luke Campbell, the Reform mayor of Hull, being a political outsider meant Kenyon seemed more trustworthy and down-to-earth to some voters.

“I think ‘deer in the headlights’ came to mind (...) he's inexperienced, very inexperienced. But I think maybe that's a good thing. It's not the usual career politician. Someone who's not jaded by the system and corrupted by it, if you will, might actually do good rather than usual.”

Ben, Engineer, Platt Bridge

“I don't believe that Rob Kenyon has got any communication skills. If anyone saw him on Question Time last week, I thought he was hopeless, absolutely hopeless... If Reform are going to put somebody up, by all means, they can – but put somebody up who's quality, who's able to communicate properly. He was out of his depth completely. How would Rob Kenyon represent this constituency in Parliament when he couldn't communicate on Question Time, never mind in Parliament?”

Rachel, Housing Officer, Asthon

“I don't think he's up to the job at all. He doesn't seem to have a clue what he's doing... I feel a bit sorry for him because he's been put up there and he clearly can't handle it, but yet he's being left to flounder there.”

Paula, Retired, Ashton

Similarly, voters raised concerns that Kenyon would not be able to effect change for Makerfield, either because of his lack of experience or, often, because his party is not currently in power – whereas Burnham could act as an instant fix. Some felt that having one more Reform MP in Parliament would make little difference, whereas having Burnham as an MP could bring down Keir Starmer. In a contest without a clear pro-status quo candidate, it was hard for Reform to frame Kenyon as the anti-Starmer ticket.

“But actually what I'd like to see is an MP for me who can articulate the challenges that are in our area effectively, they're going to be my voice in Parliament (...) So what I've not seen any evidence of from Rob Kenyon is that he's capable of doing that.”

Archie, IT Manager, Hindley

“Robert Kenyon is a Reform MP who I don't think would make as much impact nationally as Andy Burnham could potentially, but locally he didn't even turn up for his first council meeting. He's not been active in his community. He's not visible in the community.”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

The second – and much more potent – debate was around Kenyon's past social media comments. The candidate's misogynistic comments, graphic remarks about broadcaster Carol Vorderman, and anti-abortion views, were highly polarising. Voters showed a wide range of responses: many Reform supporters viewed the comments as *“banter”*, the misjudged but ultimately harmless remarks of a much younger man.

“I think to me it doesn't make any difference – I'm a retired prison officer, and 20-odd years ago I was on the landings, and it was a predominantly male-dominated environment, and the banter that was on those landings was far worse than that.”

This Robert Kenyon is in his early forties, so if he made these remarks 10 to 15 years ago, it was more commonplace back then – it was more, dare I say it, accepted to make these comments. And it was banter. And I think we've gone down this PC route over the last decade where, oh, you can't say that, you can't say this."

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

"I'm from a generation where men may make comments like that. Women gave as good as they got – they just batted it back, really... It doesn't matter to me, to be honest."

Elaine, Retired, Bryn

"I know that what you say when you're with your mates – you have banter, you have a laugh. And I think the comments he made, although they were public, that's how he made them – in that spirit. Whilst I think some of them are really, really bad, I do get that you don't want to be judged by the worst thing you've said when you've had a few."

Lisa, Teacher, Winstanley

Yet just as often, people responded with disgust when they heard the comments. Many saw them as disqualifying, regardless of when they were made. Both the personal element of his comments toward Carol Vorderman, and his views on abortion, particularly stood out to some voters, who may just have seen him as inept, but now saw Kenyon as a threat to women's rights – someone they felt compelled to vote *against*. This was not limited to women: men and in particular fathers of daughters raised the comments as a black mark just as often.

"Sexist, despicable views about a lot of things. As a man, I think does that represent me? Nevermind the fact that I've got a wife and a 20-year-old daughter. It just makes me feel very uncomfortable."

Daniel, Marketing Manager, Ashton

"I think it's really concerning that a person who's going to be making sort of policies and influencing policies and standing up for women, it's quite concerning that he's made those comments and not quite seemed strong enough in his apology for them."

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

Beyond these two camps, there was a third group who felt that Kenyon's remarks might have been forgivable, but who were deterred by his lack of apology. For these voters, the issue was less the comments themselves – many accepted that people say things in their youth, or under different social norms, that they later regret – and more about his refusal to properly account for them when given the chance, and being combative or evasive when challenged in the Question Time debate.

“If he said them as a younger man, then yes, he should stand up and apologise and say, ‘they were my feelings then, I was a young man, I don’t believe that now.’ He hasn’t done that.”

Wendy, Finance Manager, Hindley Green

“My concern is – if he’d come out and said, ‘I made those really stupid comments, I didn’t actually know any better when I made a lot of those comments... although I obviously didn’t intend to cause offence, I am sorry to those who have offended, and I am committed to positive language’ – that would have been different. The issue I have is Nigel Farage coming out and going, ‘so what, that’s how ordinary blokes talk.’”

Lisa, Teacher, Winstanley

“They were given the chance on Question Time to apologise for what he said, and he wouldn’t even apologise. So that says it all, really. If he held his hands up and said, ‘I’m dead sorry, it was a long time ago’ – but he didn’t.”

Alison, Cake Maker, Ashton

It seems to backfire when Reform adopts tactics used by US Republicans and the Trump campaign in America, in this case ‘never apologise.’ Highly polarising approaches focused on base mobilisation translate less well to the UK, where things like an apology will lead at least some Britons to think it fair-minded to consider the case closed.

“(Kenyon) just sounds like an English version of Donald Trump because that’s what a lot of the Reform policies are(...). Nigel Farage has got a real close relationship with Donald Trump and he says things like that.”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

All in all, Reform’s decision to put up Kenyon as a candidate likely backfired, both by deterring wavering voters uncomfortable with his inexperience and misogynistic remarks, and by galvanising progressive voters to rally against Reform.

Nigel Farage

Nigel Farage also had a polarising impact on the debate, clearly attracting many voters who were concerned about immigration and wanted to punish the Labour Government, while other voters said they felt unable to trust him – including some who were otherwise sympathetic to Reform.

“He’s an excellent guy and he knows his stuff. He can handle anything they throw at him. He’s brilliant.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

“When you listen to Farage and he goes on about this utopia, fantastic. Everybody would like to live there, but he hasn't got a plan to get from where we are now today. None of them have got a credible plan.”

Anne, Retired, Asthon

“The prospect of Nigel Farage as prime minister is frankly quite terrifying. I think he's fundamentally corrupt and in it for himself and he's actually even more sycophantic as far as Trump's concerned.”

Sarah, HR director, Ashton

In particular, Farage's “common sense approach” to immigration came up as a positive. While some voters felt unclear about Andy Burnham's stance on issues like migration and the EU, there was no such confusion when it came to Farage – and voters liked his willingness to “*call a spade a spade*”.

“So when it comes to Farage, I really don't like him. I wasn't able to vote in the referendum, but I did support Remain and I'm pro LGBTQ+, so women's rights. I'm very much on that side of things, but I'm very concerned about immigration. I'm very concerned about culture. And I think that simple fact that it's so damaging and so impactful to the country as it's corrosive, it could make me vote Reform, particularly in this by-election.”

Ben, between jobs, Ashton

“[Farage] is different, that's for sure. He's very much in your face. I think he calls a spade a spade and he's not frightened to do so, but him and his party, yeah, they're an unknown. But to be honest with you, I'd be quite happy for them to have a crack at it.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

“I just feel that Nigel Farage, he's really pushing that immigration is too much. And whilst it's too much, we do need some. We do need skills from abroad.”

Georgia, Retired PCSO, Bryn

Where Farage may have detracted from Reform's vote share was in his response to the Henry Nowak case. Many right-leaning voters in Makerfield agreed with his diagnosis of two-tier policing, but his call for “*pure cold rage*,” and the sense he disregarded the wishes of Henry's parents, alienated voters who otherwise sympathised.

“I don't disagree with what he said, but the manner in which it's been done, if he's not had the permission of the parent, which clearly I don't think he has, I think that's bang out of order.”

Alex, Machine Manufacturer, Ashton

There is no doubt that these polarising remarks – from both Nigel Farage and Rob Kenyon – turned some wavering voters away from Reform UK. But perhaps even more consequentially, they seemed to galvanise progressive voters who were now willing to vote tactically to keep out Reform. As discussed in Chapter 1, voting “negatively” was a driving force in this election, and Andy Burnham’s ability to unite the left bloc depended, at least in part, on fear of Reform.

“I'm glad that Reform didn't get in. It's the only thing I was hoping for personally... it's not so much Burnham getting in. It's more like Reform didn't get in for me.”

Simon, student, Ashton

In this election, there also emerged a sense that some voters were voting Reform *in spite of* Nigel Farage, not because of him. While Farage is still evidently one of his party’s greatest assets, there appears to be a growing number of voters who want an anti-establishment party with a strong stance on migration, but distrust Nigel Farage personally. There were early signs in some of the focus groups that Farage’s £5 million donation had cut through and, for some voters, had made them think twice about the Reform leader.

“People who I've spoken to with regard to the Reform Party, the biggest majority of them, they aren't racist, they're just interested in the country and they're patriotic (...) personally, I don't like Farage and I don't think he'll ever be prime minister. I think the party need another leader.”

Maisie, retired, Hindley

[When asked what they thought of Farage]: Not a lot, to be honest. When you read about this four million pound house he bought, he avoided paying tax because he put it in his girlfriend's name or whatever he's done. I don't think much of him to be honest. I don't think much of that party generally from what I've learnt, but everybody's got a right to vote for who they want to at the end of the day.”

Laura, retail worker, Ashton

Kemi Badenoch

This by-election was a two-horse race. Yet when voters spoke of the Conservative candidate, Michael Winstanley, they often spoke of him warmly. Many voters were equally impressed by Kemi Badenoch; despite her lack of presence in Macclesfield, her name arose spontaneously in focus groups and people described her “*straight-talking*” approach positively. Yet this did not translate into support for the Conservatives with Conservative-minded voters splitting between Labour and Reform. For some, this was simply due to a sense that the by-election was a two-horse race; for others, it was a sense that the wider Conservative Party is still broken – and voters aren’t ready to forgive them for their legacy in government.

“I could never vote Conservative, but I like her. I think she's very sharp and she wipes the floor with Keir Starmer on a regular basis.”

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

"I'm not a natural Conservative supporter, but I think she's definitely growing in confidence and she's becoming a very confident communicator. And I think actually she could actually increase the vote because I think she's doing really well."

Katherine, Mental Health Worker, Ashton

"I think she's a good spokeswoman, but I still think that the party, they're not ready for office yet. They've got a lot of work to do because there's a lot of the old guards still there."

Anne, Retired, Ashton

"Margaret Thatcher with humour. She's growing into her own as well."

Elaine, retired, Bryn

Rupert Lowe

This by-election was one of Restore Britain's first major electoral tests, and it proved that they have an appeal that is not just online. Awareness of Lowe and his party was high, and seemed to increase throughout the campaign.

"I personally believe Rupert Lowe talks a lot of sense - for what he wants to do for the country and the betterment of the people in it, I think he's the way forward."

Ben, Engineer, Platt Bridge

"I think at this stage, they're nothing more than the protest vote, really."

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

"It's a social media party, isn't it? He's got 400,000 followers on social media, but he's not got the groundwork and the network to make it."

Alan, Retired, Ashton

Restore appears to be drawn from two groups: one which is highly online, a group who want a more full fat, boundaryless version of Reform, embracing remigration, ethnonationalism and figures Farage has shunned such as Tommy Robinson. But in Makerfield, there was a second group who simply think Reform are too establishment, or *"Tories 2.0."*

For this second group, Restore Britain is not always seen as a more right-wing alternative. Two voters in a focus group after the election - both of whom liked Lowe but voted tactically for Reform - said they considered Restore to be more moderate, less aligned with the far right and less divisive than Reform.

While this perception is not widely held, it illustrates that Restore is not simply seen as a further-right alternative – it is the anti-establishment rather than the further-right appeal that is fuelling Restore. Their appeal is broader, and they're not just online.

“Reform, just some of the elements go too much the other way for me. I know I shouldn't say it because it's generalising where they go to the far right. I don't like that element and Restore's a bit more sensible for me if you like, but still aligns with the principles I would want to see.”

Sophie, School Administrator, Hindley

“I would say that Nigel Farage just is not somebody that people are going to get behind unless they agree with the right leanings. Whereas I think Rupert Lowe comes across as a lot more sensible, a lot more professional and somebody who people could vote for even if they didn't necessarily agree with all of his policies. I think Nigel Farage is very divisive.”

Rachel, Housing Officer, Ashton

We saw Restore's vote share squeezed by tactical voting on the right. Many said they were worried about Restore splitting the right-wing vote and handing Burnham victory. While this did not materialise, it is likely that the 7 per cent vote share Restore won was not their total pool of considerers in Makerfield.

“I voted Reform when I would have voted Restore because I didn't want to split the right vote.”

Louisa, Post Officer, Ashton

“I did exactly the same as you, voted Reform instead of Restore because I didn't want to split the vote.”

Sophie, School Administrator, Hindley

The Green Party and the Liberal Democrats

Throughout the campaign, there was a notable, almost complete absence of the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party in our discussions with voters. They were rarely raised in any focus groups and, on polling day, the two parties received fewer than 500 votes between them. Even voters who might naturally consider voting for these parties dismissed them in focus groups.

“Lib Dems are nowhere. Greens are nowhere. So I think it's between Andy Burnham and Rob Kenyon.”

Daniel, Marketing Manager, Ashton

“A group of my students actually interviewed Sarah Wakefield, came up with all their own questions... she was absolutely lovely. She asked them what they thought. It was a really good discussion.”

Lisa, Teacher, Winstanley

This is a marker of how completely Burnham managed to unite the left in Macclesfield. The same dynamics that drove the result in Gorton and Denton - a fear of letting Reform in, and a desire among disillusioned progressives to register their anger at Labour without actually helping the right - were present here too. But where those dynamics might easily have hurt a different Labour candidate (as they did in Gorton and Denton), in Burnham's case they appear to have worked in his favour: voters who might otherwise have drifted to the Greens or the Liberal Democrats as a protest chose instead to rally behind him.

“They need to stand down. The Greens need to stand down.”

Katherine, mental health worker, Wigan

“I was going to waste my vote and go for the Greens or another party just to vote. Then I did go with Labour because I don't want Reform to be in.”

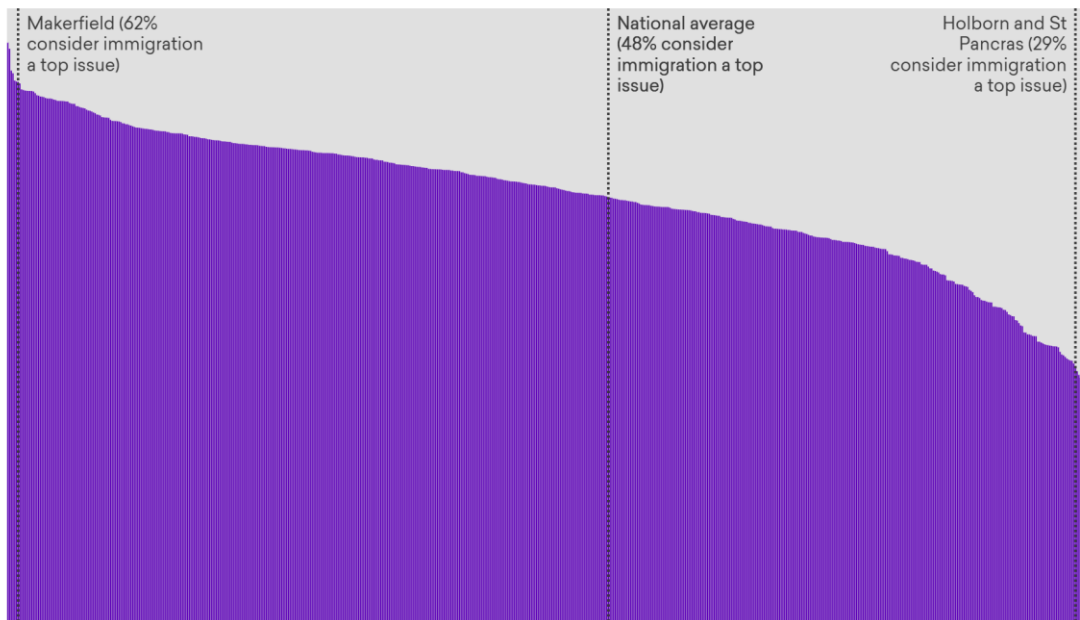
Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

Chapter 3 - Issues

Immigration

Makerfield is one of the seats in the country most concerned about immigration. According to More in Common's immigration salience MRP, an estimated 62 per cent of Makerfield residents consider immigration to be a top issue, the 7th highest salience in the whole of Britain.

62% of Makerfield residents say immigration is a top issue - the 7th highest in the country



More in Common • More in Common's immigration MRP

Immigration was among the most salient issues at this by-election. Voters debated at length Reform's position and Labour's record on this topic. Many made clear that their main concern was illegal migration, and that controlled and limited legal immigration still had an important role to play in Britain:

"More illegal immigration than immigration."

Alex, Machine Manufacturer, Ashton

"I think this country needs migration as long as it's legal and we're getting workers in. The NHS, God bless them, nurses from Kerala – it's world class and the NHS will be lost without the Indian nurses, but it's the illegal migration that's the issue."

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

“There's a difference between legal people who want to come here and they've gone through the legal channels and people who are just coming here with no control over, we don't know their background.”

Pauline, retired medical secretary

“Immigration is the fundamental issue. It affects everything.”

Michael, Wigan, Retired

“I really don't like their economics, but it's just immigration.”

James, between jobs, Makerfield

Beyond the concerns themselves, many felt further frustrated that their ability to speak out on immigration was limited – that genuine worries were dismissed as racist and that Reform and Restore voters were tarred with the same brush.

“I just think it's the media that portrayed Reform as racist. But when you look at the top people in Reform, they're not actually racist... I think a lot of people in the media are portraying Reformers as racist when they're not really racist.”

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

“I was just thinking about something Marilyn said right at the beginning where she said people think people who vote for reform are racist, I think that's not the case, but I do think that they've been banging the same drum for so long that that's all anybody hears now... it doesn't make people racist.”

Laura, Retail Worker, Ashton

This view was contested within the same rooms. Other voters pushed back, arguing that some on the right use language deliberately calibrated to stoke fear of migrants as a group.

“I think (Farage) is using language like invasion, floodgates... language which makes people see migrants as a homogenous group... no one stopped to ask them, did you come on a boat, before they started [shouting at people] – they just looked at the colour of the skin, and that is worrying.”

Louisa, Post Officer, Ashton

Overall, much like in Runcorn and Helsby, the debate around immigration reflected negatively on the Labour Government and their perceived inability to get the issue under control. But Andy Burnham's distance from the government perhaps meant that he did not receive the same backlash and the issue had less prominence than other issues.

Brexit and the EU

Soon after Burnham was confirmed as Labour's candidate in Makerfield, potential leadership contender Wes Streeting said he'd like Britain to rejoin the EU one day, putting Burnham – campaigning in a Leave-voting seat, but having previously expressed pro-Rejoin views – in a challenging position.

For some, Burnham's lack of clarity on Europe was a red flag:

“I know that Andy is still keen on getting us back into Europe and we need to be out of Europe and we certainly need to get rid of the European Court of Human Rights as soon as possible.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

“We don't need Europe telling us what's right and what's wrong. That's the issue.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

But attitudes on the EU haven't stood still since 2016: polling suggests Makerfield would now vote to rejoin by 55 to 45. In focus groups, many who'd backed Brexit a decade ago felt let down by Brexit – and some even blamed Farage directly:

“If we vote Reform, the person who would very potentially be the next Prime Minister lied to us about Brexit and he now denies he lied to us about Brexit. He denies that he thought it was a great idea and if we vote Reform in, he's going to be our next Prime Minister and it terrifies me.”

Wendy, Finance Manager, Hindley Green

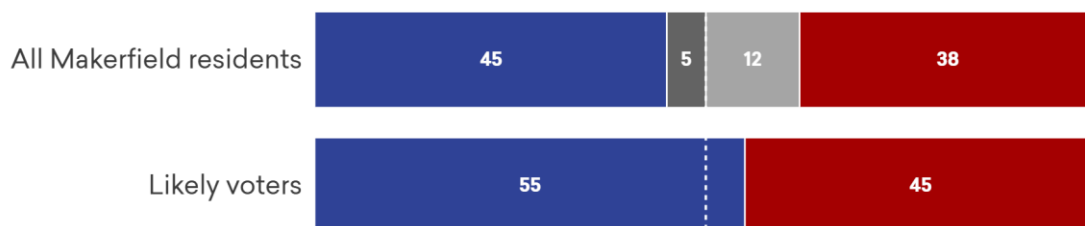
“I'm sort of down the middle of whether to go for Reform or Labour, but I don't trust Nigel Farage. He sold us Brexit and that a lot more money would go into the NHS by what they'd save on Brexit and that's not happened. So I struggle to comprehend whether he'd make a good Prime Minister, but I don't trust Labour either because of the way that Keir Starmer's been. I do like Andy Burnham.”

Anne, retired, Ashton

Makerfield residents would narrowly vote to rejoin the EU

And how would you vote in this referendum, would it be for the UK to rejoin or stay out of the European Union?

● Rejoin the EU ● Would not vote ● Don't know ● Stay outside the EU



More in Common • 28 May - 12 June 2026

"Likely voters" includes only those who say they would be likely to vote in a referendum, and those who selected "don't know" were shown a squeeze question

Levelling Up and the North-South divide

Andy Burnham's appeal often rests on his perception as a champion of the North, and a challenger to Westminster. It's clear that this was a key driver of his vote. A perception of Makerfield being left behind or forgotten was pervasive among voters on all sides of the contest, and Burnham was often seen as the best option to close this gap.

"How are they going to strengthen and give power to our communities and level up the North South Divide?"

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

"What are you going to do for the local area? What are you going to do for us?"

Ben, Engineer, Platt Bridge

"Massive north south divide. I was in London with my daughter and the difference between London and up north, the gap is getting wider for decades. I've been going down to London for visits and I could just see the gap widening. It's meant to be shrinking, but it's not. It's getting wider."

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

"If you could do for the country what he's done for Manchester, we would be in a better place, for sure."

Marilyn, Retired, Hindley

However, some doubted Burnham's credentials as a champion for places like Makerfield, and felt that Burnham's North-South framing was really about Manchester and London, rather than places like Wigan, Ashton and surrounding villages.

“But this north-south divide, it's more Manchester-focused and London-focused. Places like Wigan sadly just get forgotten about. The transport doesn't even extend out to us, trams and things like that, and there's no intention to even do that.”

Alice, Associate Architect, Hindley Green

Cost of Living

The cost of living has been the number one issue of concern for Britons since the pandemic. In big issue tracking it outpolls every other issue by almost a two to one margin. More than anything else the mood of broken Britain is driven by a sense that the cost of living is making life too hard, making work not pay, and generally sending things backwards.

Many in Makerfield felt that Labour had not taken enough action on this issue, and had even made people's lives harder because they didn't know or didn't care about the cost of living.

“I've never known a Labour government make it more difficult for the working class. And that's what he seems to have done.”

Melissa, Retired, Ashton

Some pointed to specific decisions: the winter fuel allowance, the WASPI pension changes, and a general sense of broken promises on tax.

“The winter fuel allowance — that was the first time I was eligible for it and didn't get it. Retirement as well as being done by WASPI, because they ripped the pension from me without telling me. And the thing is with Labour is my granddad was a pit man, he died of pneumoconiosis, all my father's family were Labour through and through. And I am finding it so difficult to even think about Labour.”

Carol, Retired Prison Service Worker, Bryn

“During the last general election, when Labour were coming with all the plans of what they were going to do, they were saying, 'We're not going to raise income tax, we're not going to raise national insurance, we're not going to raise VAT,' but we're going to do this and this... How is he going to raise the money to do these things without raising taxes?”

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

The social contract, welfare, and zero-sum thinking

For many, the cost of living crisis has a deeper effect: it reinforces a sense that the basic social contract in Britain had broken down. Many described a sense that working hard no longer guaranteed a good life, while the welfare system seems to be rewarding the wrong people.

“I've never earned as much money in my work, but I've never felt as poor.”

Simon, Head of Operations, Winstanley

“The largest area where government money is spent – in other words, taxpayers' money – is the welfare. Which is massive. I used to work in DWP, and since I left there must be another 40 benefits or elements of benefits around now than there was when I worked there.”

Liz, Retired, Hindley Green

Notably, these concerns weren't limited to voters on the right in Makerfield. Many Labour loyalists also voiced a frustration about welfare spending, and a sense that the system is too easy to exploit. For some, it felt like the purpose of welfare – to support those who most need it – had been diluted by too many people treating benefits as “payday.”

“It used to be it was brought in to help people if you lost your job or you were sick. Now it's crazy – it's cradle to grave. You'd speak to some people, offenders or victims, and they'd be waiting for payday – and I'm like, that's benefits day, because to them it's payday.”

Anne, Retired, Bryn

“They say, 'Oh, we've taken so many million children out of poverty.' Now that's the children of people who are not working. What about the young families who are both doing minimum wage jobs and working all the hours they can just to make ends meet? They get no help.”

Jill, Hawkley Hall

“People on our street who have the council houses and all the benefits, they live the same life [as us]. I'm paying for it.”

Rachel, Council Worker, Pemberton

It's clear that some voters in Makerfield will be watching how a potential Burnham government responds to the issue of welfare – and many questioned how he would get a grip on it while managing opposition from within his own party.

“Is he going to tax more? That's not going to be popular. Is he going to make welfare cuts? Then he's got a problem with the left of the Labour Party.”

Lisa, Teacher Wigan

Local issues

Despite the national backdrop, the by-election also had a prominent local element, because alongside setting out a national vision, Burnham was defending a local record as Mayor in the region.

One of the most prominent examples was the Bickershaw waste dump. One of the largest of its kind in the country at 25,000 tonnes, this dump appeared in 2024 when lorries began to illegally offload waste at the site, which is at the end of a residential road and next to a primary school. Some voters say this is a perfect example of how the North has been left behind. Former MP Josh Simons as well as Burnham campaigned hard to get the dump cleared, while Kenyon attributed it to Britain's decline under Conservative and Labour governments.

“He also said he got a million pounds towards Ashton Library, and that's a lie – because Josh Simons did that. And the same with the tip, the dump they wanted sorted – that was Josh.”

Alice, Associate Architect, Hindley Green

Flooding was a recurring issue, particularly for those in Platt Bridge and Hindley Green, many of whom recognised both Burnham and outgoing MP Josh Simons for showing up in person when it happened. However for some, memories of past flooding also shaped scepticism about housing development – something which was a question mark hanging over Burnham through much of the campaign given his housebuilding promises.

“Andy's been quite proactive in helping with the flooding in Plattbridge – regardless, before he became a candidate for MP – and also the Bickershaw big waste problem. He was actively involved in that as well. So he has proactively been working for Makerfield before all this came about.”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

“We were flooded twenty-odd years ago. He got really involved – he was meeting with the housing developers... never buying a Persimmon home, a liability, shall we say.”

Sarah, HR, Hindley Green

“I used to live on the (...) estate, and the flooding that goes on – they're on about building on there. I don't understand how on earth anybody can build on that. The infrastructure in Hindley is a nightmare... it's very concerning.”

Sophie, School Administrator, Hindley

Wigan and Ashton's declining high streets were a recurring frustration, with some voters drawing a sharp contrast between past and present.

“The town centre, especially in Wigan, is dead – it looks like a shanty town at times... it was vibrant once, full of businesses, independent shops, nightlife. People used to come from other cities to Wigan.”

Susan, Therapist, Ashton

Burnham's record on the Clean Air Zone and congestion charge drew some of the sharpest criticism of his time as Mayor, often tangled up with claims about his wife's business interests.

“I've got two words: congestion charge.”

Marilyn, Retired, Hindley

“He wasted a fortune, didn't he, putting his cameras up... it ran into hundreds of thousands of pounds. A complete waste of taxpayer's money.”

Alan, Retired, Ashton

Development was a live local anxiety, particularly around green-belt land and strained infrastructure.

“You've got 2,000 extra houses, 2,000 extra cars – one road is going to make no difference, it just moves traffic from one bottleneck to another. And it's been a big issue for me.”

Val, Admin Officer, Hawkley Hall

Crime and anti-social behaviour came up regularly as a local priority, particularly on social media. Burnham actively campaigned on this issue, promising to tackle the organised crime taking place in “dodgy” high street shops as well as illegal e-bike use. Although this resonated with constituents, who almost universally agreed that there was an insufficient police presence in the area, some felt it was an issue Burnham could have dealt with himself in his time as Mayor but failed to do so.

Burnham secured one local win before he was even elected. Labour councillors had been working on attaining a grant to keep Ashton Library open – a goal which they achieved during the campaign, and which Burnham claimed partial credit for. Some celebrated his work for the local community, while others accused him of taking credit for a victory that wasn't his.

Chapter 4 - What happens next?

Responses to Burnham's speech

Shown a clip of Andy Burnham's acceptance speech after his victory, voters divided along partisan lines in their response. The line that resonated most with voters was when Burnham promised to change politics, and described this as the *"final chance to change"*. Some voters who had backed Burnham in the by-election said he sounded *"like a Prime Minister"* for the first time; one voter described *"shouting at the telly"*, agreeing that this was a final chance for change and urging Burnham not to waste it.

"I was actually shouting at the telly this morning, eating my breakfast, watching that acceptance speech or whatever you call it. And I was agreeing with everything going, "Yes, Andy, it is your last chance". It's your last chance saloon! Don't waste it, mate! I was having a conversation on my own with the telly. I felt quite passionate. I felt quite goosebumpy when he was saying those things."

Lisa, Teacher, Winstanley

"I think he's entirely right there, where he talks about the final chance of change. That's definitely how I feel."

Simon, Student, Ashton

"He's saying it like a prime minister coming in. The first time in years and years where I thought, yeah, this guy. Yeah. And to be fair, that's the first time I've actually thought of him as well."

Daniel, Marketing Manager, Ashton

"As a non-Labour supporter, it's given me a little bit of hope (...) As he said in his speech, he's listening to people... that they're giving him a chance and he knows he's got three years. He's got three years here and if they don't sort it out, if he's not true to his word, then they're all out of a job."

Alex, Machine Manufacturer, Ashton

However, across both those who voted for Burnham and those who voted Reform, there was a sense that the new MP for Makerfield needed more substance and detail in his future speeches, and to answer the question over what *"changing politics"* looks like in practice.

In 2024, commentators used the term *"ming vase strategy"* to describe the Labour Party's campaign approach - promising change, but with limited detail on what that would look like so that voters could project their own hopes and expectations. Some Makerfield voters felt the same way about Burnham, that his speech *"pulled on the heartstrings"* and recognised the public's desire for change, but without any clarity about how he would achieve this. While his own voters said they had confidence that detail would emerge in

time, Reform voters were highly sceptical. It's clear that Andy Burnham still has work to do to build trust among these voters.

"I don't think that was an acceptance speech. I think that was the opening gambit of going for the leadership. I don't know if people are old enough, but you know that "things can only get better" - I was minded of that kind of sentiment. There's not a lot of content in there. There's not a lot of policy, but he is pulling on the heartstrings at this point."

Peter, Account Manager, Orrell

"In his speech he said everybody knows politics isn't working and we all need change and we've got to have hope. He hasn't once said how he's going to change politics to make everybody feel happier."

Susan, Therapist, Ashton

"The Makerfield Test"

In his speech, Burnham spoke of putting a *"Makerfield test"* at the heart of British politics - a better offer for places which feel neglected by Westminster and cut out of our national story, something politicians have spent the post-Brexit decade promising but failing to deliver. Across More in Common's eleven focus groups in the run-up to and aftermath of this by-election, three key tests emerged that could convince voters that, in Burnham's case, the promise might this time be real.

Showing he understands and cares

Burnham's success relied on proof points that he genuinely cared and understood the people he sought to represent. This came in part through showing people he had already championed Greater Manchester, particularly during the pandemic. But there was also a personal dimension: Makerfield residents told us, unprompted, about seeing him out and about in the area.

Going forward, voters said they would judge Burnham on his ongoing presence in Makerfield - living up to his promise that he would treat Makerfield as a *"touch stone, not a stepping stone"*.

"I think being present as a start, actually being present. Josh Simons was - I've only really known him in the last year or so, but he was very present from what I've heard. He was always around. He was here to talk and listen and respond back to people."

Alice, Associate Architect, Hindley Green

Record of delivery

So far, Burnham's record has largely been judged through the lens of Greater Manchester; the Bee Network buses in particular stood out as proof of concept.

“Probably the best thing he's probably done is about transport, bringing the transport under local council rule, because he's brought in the Bee Network and he's trying to copy what they're doing in London, like Transport for London.”

Katherine, Mental Health Worker, Wigan

But some voters were quick to point out that Macclesfield itself hasn't benefited as much as other places from that record yet, and were specific and practical about what delivery should look like going forward – citing things like transport, infrastructure and high street regeneration. Additionally, some voters point to issues facing Wigan and surrounding areas – particularly relating to crime and safety – and felt that

“The transport around the area is... my mum's off in Bickershaw Lane, that's so unreliable and hard work. There's a great system in principle, but there's issues there that need looking at. Just the roads and the transport would be an issue for me – and stop digging the roads every five minutes.”

Sophie, School Administrator, Hindley

“I wanted someone who's going to help Macclesfield who we can bother with potholes and small issues.”

Alice, Associate Architect, Hindley Green

It's clear that voters in Macclesfield will continue to judge Andy Burnham on the state of the local area, and one of their key concerns is that he will no longer be focused on hyperlocal improvements to transport and public services.

But more broadly, the local record of improvement is important because it can be an antidote to many Britons' sense of “pulling levers and nothing happening”. At a time when many Britons feel that the national government is unable to deliver tangible change, seeing progress on a local level can help to prove that the state can function – a credibility that will be crucial as Andy Burnham seeks to set out a national vision.

National vision

Finally, voters want to see a real national mission – to see Burnham fight for the North and Greater Manchester within Westminster, but also to tackle the issues facing the country as a whole.

Much like in focus groups across the country, this means making tangible progress on the cost of living crisis, addressing a social contract people feel is broken, and tackling illegal immigration. All of those matter, but unless Burnham can be seen to be making immediate progress on the cost of living – and demonstrating that he gets it in a way that Starmer failed to – voters' patience may not last long.

“If we don't get our own country sorted out soon, we're going to be in big trouble.”

Mike, Semi-Retired Veteran Support Officer, Ashton

Many want to see clarity on how tackling the North-South divide works in practice, rather than another empty slogan. Issues like HS2 have broken the public's trust, and it will take more than rhetoric to win it back.

“How are they going to strengthen and give power to our communities and level up the North South Divide?”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge

“I think there's been more consideration for the north of the country for the last probably 10 years or so... but it still hasn't really been delivered. You can see that with how HS2 was cancelled any further north... Whether he can deliver it is a different matter, but his legacy will depend on it absolutely.”

Alan, Warehouse Manager, Winstanley

“I think that's weak and it's an excuse, just because he wants to be basically prime minister... this North-South divide, it's more Manchester-focused and London-focused. Places like Wigan sadly just get forgotten about.”

Alice, Associate Architect, Hindley Green

“It's a great sentence. It says a lot without saying a lot, doesn't it?”

Sophie, School Administrator, Hindley

Burnham has earned an initial hearing on all three fronts, and many voters feel genuinely hopeful. But across every focus group, voters wanted evidence that a Burnham premiership had a credible national plan for change and successful delivery – as well as the reassurance that he would still represent and champion the local area.

What Macclesfield voters are describing is a demand for a politics of *can*: a politics in which government visibly makes things happen, rather than consulting endlessly or explaining why change is hard. The appetite for this is acute. Across the groups, voters drew an unflattering contrast between a Labour Government that has felt myopic and a Reform movement that, whatever else they think of it, seems to express itself clearly and could get things done. Burnham's task is to prove that the government is capable of doing things, and the cost of living is where it starts.

The bus fare cap in Greater Manchester was cited repeatedly and unprompted as proof that he can deliver. For many, it was the first time in years they had noticed a politician making their lives materially cheaper.

“I'm already feeling the benefits of what he's done... having the bus fare reduced makes a massive difference. It saved me about 60 quid a month, just by him capping the bus fare – and I think everybody in whatever wage bracket you're in is feeling it. I think stuff like that really does make a difference.”

Ella, Nurse, Highfield

“It's quite a tangible thing, isn't it? A few years ago we were going on a girls' night out. We were going to get the bus and it was something like £20 to get a taxi – why would we pay that for the bus? But now everything's kind of coming down. You're more encouraged.”

Cath, Charity Worker, Platt Bridge