

First-time and floating: How **Hong Kong BNO voters** could swing marginal seats in General Election 2024



*Top-10 target seats for the **Labour Party***



HONG KONG WATCH POLICY BRIEFING:

GENERAL ELECTION 2024: TOP-10 SEATS FOR LABOUR BASED ON HONG KONG BNO DISPERSION

BACKGROUND TO THE BNO VISA AND STATUS

Following the People's Republic of China's breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration through the imposition of the draconian National Security Law in Hong Kong, the UK Government introduced the British National Overseas (BNO) visa scheme.¹

Over 182,000 Hong Kongers who have British National Overseas (BNO) status and their dependents have applied for the scheme since its introduction in January 2021 and settled across the UK.² This makes them one of the largest growing communities in the UK.

Based on current projections, Hong Kong Watch estimates that over 140,000 Hong Kongers will have the right to vote at the next General Election.³

As a charity that works with all political parties in the UK, ahead of the General Election we encourage all parties to engage with the growing BNO community at a local, regional, and national level. This particular paper focuses on Labour, but is part of a wider series that will look at the key target seats of all the major political parties.

We urge all political parties to consider the needs and desires of the BNO community as they begin drafting their party manifestos ahead of the next General Election. This should include a clear commitment to maintain and expand the BNO Visa.

The BNO visa allows British National (Overseas) status holders and their dependents to live, work, and study in the UK for five years, after which point they can apply for settlement, and then will be eligible for British citizenship one year after.⁴

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hong-kong-bno-visa-policy-statement/hong-kong-british-national-overseas-visa-policy-statement-plain-text-version>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2023/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-each-year-including-visitors#british-national-overseas-bno-route>

³ To the end of June 2023, over 150,000 Hong Kongers have used the BNO visa to enter the UK (or have been granted the visa inside the UK). Based on current projections, we expect that 10,000 BNO visa holders will arrive in the UK per quarter for the foreseeable future. From June 2023 to September 2024, when we expect the election to take place, there are five quarters, meaning that we expect over 200,000 Hong Kongers to be in the UK on the BNO visa by the time of the election. Main applicants (BNO status holders who will have the right to vote) will comprise up to 70% of these arrivals, so there are estimated to be 140,000 eligible BNO voters.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/british-national-overseas-bno-visa>

Those who hold a BNO passport are entitled to register as electors in respect of all UK elections, provided that they also fulfil the age and residence requirements for such registration and are not subject to any other legal incapacity.⁵

The number of Hong Kongers moving to the UK is to be in line with the Home Office's impact assessment that will see between 258,000 and 322,400 Hong Kongers move to the UK by 2026.⁶

The scheme was expanded in November 2022, to allow those Hong Kongers born after June 1997 with one BNO parent access to the scheme. However, there remains a significant gap in the scheme for those too young to register for the BNO passport in 1997 alongside their parents.

BNO status

Before the UK's handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the UK government created the British National (Overseas) (BNO) nationality status which was opened to people in Hong Kong, through a registration process, to those who had British Dependent Territories citizenship. This status recognised the special and enduring ties the UK has with Hong Kongers as a result of the UK's role in Hong Kong before 1997.

BNO status falls under one of the many kinds of UK nationality, and holders are considered to be British Commonwealth citizens. Holders can apply for a British National (Overseas) passport, but this does not automatically give one the right to live, study or work in the UK.

The 1985 Hong Kong Act laid down the basis of this change, and anyone from Hong Kong had to register for BNO status from 1987 up until 30 June 1997. Once that date had passed, Hong Kongers could no longer register for BNO status.

BNO status cannot be inherited, meaning that children born to BNO parents after 30 June 1997 could not gain BNO status.

Based on anecdotal evidence, voter registration by BNOs for local elections that were held across London and in other parts of the UK in May 2022 and 2023 trended at a very high rate. Many people from Hong Kong have chosen to come to UK because of the deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong and the relentless assault on rights and freedoms. Many want to be involved in the democratic process in the UK, and we expect to see very high rates of voter registration among this community for the next General Election.

WHERE ARE BNOS MOVING TO?

Crucially, the BNO visa does not prescribe where holders should move to and it is not a requirement of the visa to report where one is living. As such, determining where BNOs are settling is not an exact science, but various indicators can be used to determine destinations.

A survey conducted in August 2020 found that over half of the respondents chose London, Manchester, Liverpool or Birmingham as their first choice of migration destination in the UK, with London alone

⁵ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/running-electoral-registration-wales/eligibility-register-vote/what-are-nationality-requirements-register-vote/can-a-citizen-british-overseas-territories-register-vote>

⁶ https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia_20200070_en.pdf

accounting for one-quarter.⁷ A leading property agency reported that Hong Kongers accounted for £959 million worth of property purchases in London between July 2020 and March 2021,⁸ four per cent of all London home sales in that period.

A survey-based report published by Hong Kongers in Britain in June 2021 echoes these findings, with almost a quarter of Hong Kongers moving to the UK choosing London as their preferred destination, with Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and Bristol as the next most-popular destinations.⁹

Schools data

Some of the best official data comes in the form of the UK government's school placement data for children outside of the UK. It shows in which local authority areas Hong Kong, Afghan, and Ukrainian children have been made offers, in England, to study in the year from September 2021 to September 2022.¹⁰ Home Office data shows that over 63,000 people used the BNO visa to enter the country during this time,¹¹ so it is a strong indicator of where people are choosing to settle. In addition, a Home Office survey of Hong Kongers moving to the UK published at the end of January 2022 showed that 59 per cent were arriving with children, the vast majority of whom were of school age.¹²

The top-10 local authority areas (in England), all with over 200 Hong Konger children registered for schools between September 2021 and September 2022, are as follows:

1. Solihull
2. Hertfordshire
3. Sutton
4. Milton Keynes
5. Surrey
6. Leeds
7. Barnet
8. Cambridgeshire
9. Salford
10. Hampshire

There were also significant numbers in Stockport, Cheshire East, Merton, Bristol, and Oxfordshire.

National Insurance registration data

Data from the UK Government Department for Work and Pensions shows new National Insurance number (NiNo) registrations by nationality, and can be broken down by parliamentary constituency.¹³

The top-20 parliamentary constituencies in terms of new NiNo registration by Hong Kongers are, as of July 2023, as follows (all of these have over 300 new NiNo registrations from Hong Kongers):

⁷ https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/STARPRO20MIGRAT_freq_rpt_v1_pori.pdf

⁸ <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/3131263/hong-kong-residents-buy-us13-billion-worth-homes-london-after-uk-opened>

⁹ <https://www.hongkongers.org.uk/bno-destinations>

¹⁰ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-placements-for-children-from-outside-of-the-uk>

¹¹ FOI request to the Home Office, made by Hong Kong Watch.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-hong-kong-british-national-overseas-visa-holders-2021/hong-kong-bno-survey-results-accessible-version>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-insurance-numbers-allocated-to-adult-overseas-nationals-to-december-2022>

1. **Salford and Eccles**
2. **Manchester Central**
3. **Birmingham, Ladywood**
4. **Warrington South**
5. **Poplar and Limehouse**
6. Solihull
7. Sutton and Cheam
8. Reading East
9. Altrincham and Sale West
10. Wokingham
11. Hendon
12. Filton and Bradley Stoke
13. Nottingham South
14. Richmond Park
15. Ealing Central and Acton
16. Cities of London and Westminster
17. Cambridge
18. Sheffield Central
19. Milton Keynes South
20. Broxtowe

It is worth noting that four of the top-five BNO constituencies are currently held by Labour: Salford and Eccles; Manchester Central; Birmingham, Ladywood; and Poplar and Limehouse. Labour should shore up its commitments to Hong Kongers in these seats.

Triangulating this data – the surveys together with school and National Insurance registration data – allows one to build a reasonable estimate of where BNOs are settling in the UK.

By looking at marginal constituencies, one can determine that there are a number of seats in the next election – which will be held in or before December 2024 – which could be swung by the Hong Konger vote.

**TOP 10 CONSTITUENCIES WHICH HONG KONGERS COULD SWING
– LABOUR TARGETS**

Constituency	MP	Party	Majority in 2019	Majority %	Estimated 2024 voting BNOs	Impact if Labour engages with the BNO community
Kensington (becoming Kensington and Bayswater)	Felicity Buchan	Conservative	150	0.3%	600+	Clear Labour Gain.
Heywood and Middleton (becoming Heywood and Middleton North)	Chris Clarkson	Conservative	663	1.4%	250+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Chipping Barnet	Theresa Villiers	Conservative	1,212	2.1%	400+	Help towards a Labour Gain
Warrington South	Andy Carter	Conservative	2,010	3.2%	2,200+	Clear Labour Gain.
Hendon	Matthew Offord	Conservative	4,230	7.7%	1600+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Reading West (becoming Reading West and Mid Berkshire)	Alok Sharma	Conservative	4,117	8.2%	900+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Watford	Dean Russell	Conservative	4,433	7.6%	500+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Gedling	Tom Randall	Conservative	679	1.4%	450+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Southampton, Itchen	Royston Smith	Conservative	4,498	9.5%	350+	Help towards a Labour Gain.
Birmingham, Northfield	Gary Sambrook	Conservative	1,640	3.8%	400+	Help towards a Labour Gain.

BNO VOTER BATTLEFIELDS FOR THE LABOUR PARTY AT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

Warrington

A sizeable BNO community has developed in Warrington spread over its two parliamentary constituencies: Warrington North and Warrington South.

At the next election, Labour will be defending Warrington North, which has a majority of just 1,509 votes which is roughly the same size as the current BNO community in the seat.

Labour will also seek to target Warrington South, which is currently occupied by Andy Carter MP who has said he will not contest the seat at the next General Election.¹⁴ The BNO community in this seat is larger than the incumbent's majority and if mobilised in support of the Labour Party could flip the seat to a Labour gain.

Reading

A growing number of BNOs have settled in Reading and appear evenly distributed across both its parliamentary constituencies: Reading East and Reading West.

Similar to Warrington, Labour will be defending one seat in Reading and hoping to gain the other seat from the Conservatives. This includes the aspiration to take the seat of the former Conservative Minister for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, Alok Sharma MP, who has a majority of just over 4,000 and has announced that he will stand down as an MP at the next election.¹⁵

To help meet this aspiration, the Labour Party would need to mobilise the large BNO community across these seats.

London

For Labour to meet its desire of forming a majority government it will need to pick up those remaining seats in London which are still held by other parties.

The growing BNO community in a number of target seats in London could help the party meet this goal, which would include helping Labour take back Kensington (becoming Kensington and Bayswater), to take Hendon for the first time since 2005, and to take Chipping Barnet for the first time in its history. It is worth noting that Dr Matthew Offord MP, the sitting Conservative MP for Hendon, announced that he would be stepping down at the next election, after serving his constituents since 2010.¹⁶ He was the first London Conservative to make such an announcement for the 2024 General Election.

¹⁴ <https://www.warrington-worldwide.co.uk/2023/05/30/andy-carter-announces-that-he-is-not-seeking-re-election-for-warrington-south-at-next-general-election/>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-66925669>

¹⁶ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/london-conservative-mp-matthew-offord-hendon-stand-down-election-b1078429.html>

Manchester

After London, Manchester has become the overwhelming second choice destination for Hong Kongers moving to the UK and is considered an electoral stronghold for the Labour Party. There are estimated to be over 25,000 BNO visa holders in the Greater Manchester region, with a further 10,000 expected by the time of next year's election.

At the next General Election, the BNO community could be mobilised to help Labour pick up a further two seats in the Manchester City Region: Heywood and Middleton (becoming Heywood and Middleton North) and Altrincham and Sale West, both of which have a Conservative incumbent, and both of whom – Chris Clarkson MP and Sir Graham Brady MP – have said they will not be standing for re-election.¹⁷

Safety and security are a key concern of Hong Kongers in Manchester after a protestor was dragged into the grounds of the Chinese consulate and beaten up in October 2022.¹⁸

Birmingham

While not as popular as London or Manchester, Birmingham is still a very attractive place for BNOs. Specifically the suburb of Solihull, which is currently served by Julian Knight MP, an independent who had the Conservative Party whip removed in December 2022 and who will stand down at the next General Election.¹⁹ It is a fairly safe Conservative constituency, with Knight winning a 21,273 majority in 2019. However, the Lib Dems narrowly won the seat in 2005 and 2010, meaning that it is by no means a sure bet for the Conservatives.

Other seats of note with regards to BNO populations in and around Birmingham include Birmingham, Ladywood, which includes Birmingham City Centre and has been continuously held by Labour since 1970.

Birmingham Northfield, won by the Conservatives from Labour in 2019 is a potential battleground, with incumbent Gary Sambrook MP winning by a margin of just 1,640 votes. It has swung several times between Labour and the Conservatives over the past 40 years.

Watford, Nottingham and Southampton

A sizeable number of Hong Kongers have moved to the middle-sized urban areas of Watford, Nottingham and Southampton and there are potentially important gains to be made from courting the BNO vote in these areas.

Take Watford: it's often a bellwether seat, with Conservative Richard Harrington claiming the seat back from Labour during David Cameron's 2010 victory, and it has remained in Conservative hands since with Dean Russell as the incumbent. It was Labour during the entire 1997–2010 period and before that Conservative under the successive Margaret Thatcher and Sir John Major government's

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-66038954> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-64880471>

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63280519>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/apr/21/mp-julian-knight-stand-down-next-election-not-seek-return-tory-whip>

over 18 years from 1979–1997. There is a growing Hong Konger community in the city, with an active civil society group to represent them.

Southampton has seen some very marginal victories over the years, particularly Southampton Itchen which is currently held by Royston Smith MP who will stand down at the next General Election.²⁰ While his majority in 2019 was 4,498, he won the 2017 election by just 31 votes, following his 2,316 victory in 2015 to take the seat out of Labour's hands. His Labour predecessor, John Denham, won by 192 votes in 2010, and the 1992 election by 551.

There is a growing Hong Konger community in Southampton, and one which will be looking to prospective Members of Parliament to take a strong stance on matters of personal security. In June 2023, Hong Kong protestors were assaulted by an alleged Chinese activist following a rally to commemorate a key date in the 2019 protest movement.²¹ In July, police charged a 23-year-old man called Zheng Gong with racially aggravated assault.²²

Nottingham and the surrounding suburbs have seen a sizeable influx of Hong Kongers moving in over the past two years. Broxtowe, the suburban constituency to the west of the city estimated to have at least 1,200 BNO voters at the next election, is currently held by the Conservatives with Darren Henry MP holding a majority was 5,331 in 2019.

Gedling to the north-east of Nottingham is another constituency where a number of Hong Kongers have moved to. The current incumbent Tom Randall MP has a majority of just 679 having won the seat from Labour in 2019 after they held the seat since 1997. Randall has been vocal about his support for Hong Kong, speaking on the topic several times during debates in Parliament, and is an active member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Hong Kong.

²⁰ <https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/23579672.mp-southampton-itchen-royston-smith-step/>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/12/hong-kong-protesters-allegedly-attacked-chinese-activists-southampton>

²² <https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/23671093.southampton-man-charged-hong-kong-protest-attack/>

Annex

Kensington (Felicity Buchan MP, Conservative) (98.7% of the constituency will become **Kensington and Bayswater** under the proposed boundary changes).

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Felicity Buchan	16,768	38.3	-3.9
Labour	Emma Dent Coad	16,618	38.0	-4.2
Liberal Democrats	Sam Gyimah	9,312	21.3	+9.1
Green	Vivien Lichtenstein	535	1.2	-0.8
Brexit Party	Jay Aston	384	0.9	New
CPA	Roger Phillips	70	0.2	New
Touch Love Worldwide	Harriet Gore	47	0.1	New
Workers Revolutionary	Scott Dore	28	0.1	New
Majority		150	0.3	N/A
Turnout		43,762	67.7	+3.9
Conservative gain from Labour		Swing	+0.2	

Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson MP, Conservative) (81.8% of the constituency will become **Heywood and Middleton North** under the proposed boundary changes).

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Chris Clarkson	20,453	43.1	+5.1
Labour	Liz McInnes	19,790	41.7	-11.6
Brexit Party	Colin Lambert	3,952	8.3	New
Liberal Democrats	Anthony Smith	2,073	4.4	+2.2
Green	Nigel Ainsworth-Barnes	1,220	2.6	New
Majority		663	1.4	N/A
Turnout		47,488	59.2	-3.2
Conservative gain from Labour		Swing	+8.4	

Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers, Conservative) (83.4% of the constituency will go to the new **Chipping Barnet** constituency)

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Theresa Villiers	25,745	44.7	-1.6
Labour	Emma Whysall	24,533	42.6	-3.1
Liberal Democrats	Isabelle Parasram	5,932	10.3	+4.9

Green	Gabrielle Bailey	1,288	2.2	-0.3
Advance	John Sheffield	71	0.1	<i>New</i>
Majority		1,212	2.1	+1.5
Turnout		57,569	72.0	+0.2
Conservative hold		Swing	+0.7	

Warrington South (Andy Carter MP, Conservative) (89.2% of the constituency will go to the new **Warrington South** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Andy Carter	28,187	45.5	+1.2
Labour	Faisal Rashid	26,177	42.3	-6.1
Liberal Democrats	Ryan Bate Sr	5,732	9.3	+3.9
Brexit Party	Clare Aspinall	1,635	2.6	<i>New</i>
SDP	Kevin Hickson	168	0.3	<i>New</i>
Majority		2,010	3.2	N/A
Turnout		61,899	72.0	-0.4
Conservative gain from Labour		Swing	+3.7	

Hendon (Matthew Offord MP, Conservative) (89% of the constituency will go to the new **Hendon** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Matthew Offord	26,878	48.8	+0.8
Labour	David Pinto-Duschinsky	22,648	41.1	-4.9
Liberal Democrats	Clareine Enderby	4,628	8.4	+4.6
Green	Portia Vincent-Kirby	921	1.7	+0.6
Majority		4,230	7.7	+5.7
Turnout		55,075	66.6	-1.6
Conservative hold		Swing	+2.8	

Reading West (Alok Sharma MP, Conservative) (56.3% will go to the new **Reading West and Mid Berkshire** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Alok Sharma	24,393	48.4	-0.5
Labour Co-op	Rachel Eden	20,276	40.2	-3.1
Liberal Democrats	Meri O'Connell	4,460	8.9	+3.0
Green	Jamie Whitham	1,263	2.5	+0.6
Majority		4,117	8.2	+2.6

Turnout	50,392	67.9	-1.6
Conservative hold	Swing	+1.3	

Watford (Dean Russell MP, Conservative) (80.4% will go to the new **Watford** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Dean Russell	26,421	45.5	-0.1
Labour	Chris Ostrowski	21,988	37.9	-4.1
Liberal Democrats	Ian Stotesbury	9,323	16.1	+7.0
SDP	Michael McGetrick	333	0.6	New
Majority		4,433	7.6	+4.0
Turnout		58,065	69.7	+1.9
Conservative hold		Swing	+2.0	

Gedling (Tom Randall MP, Conservative)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Tom Randall	22,718	45.5	+2.7
Labour	Vernon Coaker	22,039	44.1	-7.8
Liberal Democrats	Anita Prabhakar	2,279	4.6	+2.6
Brexit Party	Graham Hunt	1,820	3.6	New
Green	Jim Norris	1,097	2.2	+1.2
Majority		679	1.4	N/A
Turnout		49,953	69.9	-2.6
Conservative gain from Labour		Swing	+5.2	

Southampton Itchen (Royston Smith MP, Conservative)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Royston Smith	23,952	50.5	+4.0
Labour	Simon Letts	19,454	41.0	-5.5
Liberal Democrats	Liz Jarvis	2,503	5.3	+2.3
Green	Osman Sen-Chadun	1,040	2.2	+0.6
UKIP	Kim Rose	472	1.0	-1.4
Majority		4,498	9.5	+9.4
Turnout		47,421	65.6	+0.4
Conservative hold		Swing	+4.8	

Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook MP, Conservative) (99.4% will go to the new **Birmingham, Northfield** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Gary Sambrook	19,957	46.3	+3.6
Labour	Richard Burden	18,317	42.5	-10.7
Liberal Democrats	Jamie Scott	1,961	4.6	+2.4
Brexit Party	Keith Rowe	1,655	3.8	New
Green	Eleanor Masters	954	2.2	+0.3
UKIP	Kenneth Lowry	254	0.6	New
Majority		1,640	3.8	N/A
Turnout		43,238	58.7	-2.6
Registered electors		73,694		