





HONG KONG WATCH POLICY BRIEFING:

GENERAL ELECTION 2024: TOP-10 SEATS FOR THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS 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 the Liberal Democrats, 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 Liberal Democrats have a strong track-record of campaigning for BNO rights. The late Lord Ashdown, the former leader of the party and a founding Patron of Hong Kong Watch, was one of the first British politicians to be associated with this campaign. He visited Hong Kong in November 2017, on behalf of Hong Kong Watch, to underline Britain's duty to Hong Kong, meeting with political

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 be 140,000 eligible BNO voters.



stakeholders and to review Hong Kong's freedoms, basic rights, the rule of law and autonomy under "one country, two systems" and the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Lord Ashdown used his platform to advocate for BNO rights of abode in the UK,⁴ for the UK Government to denounce the abuse of colonial laws in Hong Kong,⁵ and to raise the erosion of rights in the city in Parliament countless times.

The Liberal Democrats were the first major party to electorally commit to supporting Hong Kongers. In their 2019 manifesto, they committed to: "Honour our legal and moral duty to the people of Hong Kong by reopening the British National Overseas Passport offer, extending the scheme to provide the right to abode to all holders".⁶

In autumn 2020, the party passed a motion at conference, moved by Alistair Carmichael MP, a Patron of Hong Kong Watch and Co-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hong Kong, to call on the UK Government to expand their proposals so that *all Hong Kongers* are given the right of abode and a pathway to citizenship, regardless of whether or not they have BNO status. Among others, they also called on the government to enact Magnitsky legislation and encourage mutual action from other countries to hold Hong Kong and Chinese officials responsible to account in the event of any gross breaches of human rights in Hong Kong.

In this sense, they have gone further with their commitments to the people of Hong Kong than either Labour or the Conservatives.

On the Foreign Secretary's visit to Beijing at the end of August 2023, the Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Layla Moran MP, said: "James Cleverly should think again about whether this is the signal the UK should be sending out." 8

Strong statements of support for Hong Kongers, backed by concrete policy proposals, could see the party win thousands of votes at the next General Election from these brand new voters who have never voted before in a UK parliamentary election.

The Hong Kong BNO vote will be crucial in the Liberal Democrat's attempts to revive their UK parliamentary footprint to levels not seen since 2015.

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.⁹

 $^{^{4} \, \}underline{\text{https://www.hongkongwatch.org/all-posts/2018/5/17/lord-ashdown-windrush-highlights-how-the-uk-has-failed-commonwealth-citizens-in-her-last-colony-hong-kong}$

⁵ https://www.ft.com/content/d66d69aa-6ef4-11e8-8863-a9bb262c5f53

⁶ https://www.libdems.org.uk/policy/2019-liberal-democrat-manifesto

⁷ https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/motions/autumn-2020/f31

⁸ https://www.libdems.org.uk/news/article/lib-dems-urge-cleverly-to-think-again-ahead-of-china-visit

⁹ 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.¹⁰

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 2026.¹¹

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

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia 20200070 en.pdf



accounting for one-quarter.¹² A leading property agency reported that Hong Kongers accounted for £959 million worth of property purchases in London between July 2020 and March 2021,¹³ 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.¹⁴

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. Home Office data shows that over 63,000 people used the BNO visa to enter the country during this time, 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. 17

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.¹⁸

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):

¹² https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/STARPRO20MIGRAT freq rpt v1 pori.pdf

¹³ https://www.scmp.com/business/article/3131263/hong-kong-residents-buy-us13-billion-worth-homes-london-after-uk-opened

¹⁴ https://www.hongkongers.org.uk/bno-destinations

¹⁵ https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-placements-for-children-from-outside-of-the-uk

¹⁶ FOI request to the Home Office, made by Hong Kong Watch.

¹⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-hong-kong-british-national-overseas-visa-holders-2021/hong-kong-bno-survey-results-accessible-version

 $^{^{18}\ \}underline{\text{https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-insurance-numbers-allocated-to-adult-overseas-nationals-to-december-2022}$



- 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

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 - LIBERAL DEMOCRAT TARGETS (CURRENTLY SECOND)

Constituency	MP	Party	Majority in 2019	Majority %	Estimated 2024 voting BNOs	Impact if Lib Dems engage with the BNO community
Wimbledon	Stephen Hammond	Conservative	628	1.2%	700+	Clear Lib Dem gain
Carshalton and Wallington	Elliot Colburn	Conservative	629	1.3%	500+	Lib Dem gain
Sutton and Cheam	Paul Scully (minister)	Conservative	8,351	16.5%	2000+	Help towards Lib Dem gain
Cities of London and Westminster	Nickie Aiken	Conservative	3,953	9.2%	1400+	Help towards Lib Dem gain



Finchley and	Mike Freer	Conservative	6,562	11.9%	750+	Help towards
Golders Green						Lib Dem gain
Cheadle	Mary	Conservative	2,336	4.2%	650+	Help towards
	Robinson					Lib Dem gain
Guildford	Angela	Conservative	3,337	5.7%	1200+	Help towards
	Richardson					Lib Dem gain
Wokingham	John	Conservative	7,383	11.9%	1800+	Help towards
	Redwood					Lib Dem gain
South	Anthony	Conservative	2,904	4.3%	700+	Help towards
Cambridgeshire	Browne					Lib Dem gain
Winchester	Steve Brine	Conservative	985	1.7%	350+	Help towards
						Lib Dem gain

BNO VOTER BATTLEGROUNDS FOR THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS AT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

London

While Labour dominates the share of parliamentary seats in London and the Liberal Democrats currently hold only three seats in the capital (Kingston and Surbiton, Richmond Park, and Twickenham), there are a few constituencies which the Lib Dems could capture at the next General Election with the help of the BNO Hong Konger community.

Five seats in London are earmarked in the list above and it is worth noting that all of these are currently held by the Conservative Party. Wimbledon and nearby Sutton and Cheam are estimated to have at least 700 and 2000 BNO voters respectively by the 2024 General Election. Neighbouring Carshalton and Wallington was won by Elliot Colburn MP in 2019, gaining a slender 629 majority and ending 22 years of Lib Dem rule in the constituency.

The Cities of London and Westminster constituency, while held continuously by the Conservatives since 1950, has witnessed tightening majorities in recent years, with the Liberal Democrats best-placed to unseat Nickie Aiken MP. The emergence of the journalist Edward Lucas, an astute critic of China and Russia, as the Lib Dems candidate, will not be ignored by the Hong Konger community in central London.

Finchley and Golders Green in north London would appear safer for the Conservatives on the surface, but Labour held the seat from 1997–2010 and the Lib Dems emerged as the closest opposition in the 2019 election.

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.



The Lib Dems could, however, have some success by mobilising the BNO community in Cheadle, which is currently held by the Conservative Mary Robinson MP with a slim 4.2% majority. The Lib Dems held the seat from 2001–2015, and have otherwise been the closest competitor for almost the entire history of the seat. There are estimated to be more than 650 eligible BNO voters in the constituency at the next election.

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 2022.¹⁹

Realistically, Labour are the biggest threat in the other seven seats held by the Conservatives in Greater Manchester, but William Wragg MP's 10% majority in the southern Manchester seat of Hazel Grove could be one for the Lib Dems to target. They held the seat from 1997–2015, and the incumbent has announced his intention to step down at the next General Election.²⁰

Guildford

Guildford is alongside Reading as a popular destination for BNOs who want to remain within commuting distance of London. The seat swung substantially to the Liberal Democrats in 2019, and is now a marginal again with a Conservative majority of just over 3,000 votes. The Lib Dems last held the seat in 2001 with a majority of 538. The BNO community is estimated to have 1,200 eligible voters at the General Election in 2024.

Reading is not mentioned in the list above, but with an estimated BNO voting population of 3,000 across Reading East and Reading West, candidates should be engaging with the local Hong Konger population. Reading East is held by Labour's Matt Rodda MP who has a majority of almost 6,000, and Reading West is held by 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.²¹

Wokingham

The constituency of Wokingham, which covers the town and the southern suburbs of Reading, has received many new arrivals from Hong Kong. Hong Kong Watch estimates that there will be close to 2,000 new BNO voters in the constituency by the General Election of 2024. The senior Conservative Sir John Redwood MP has represented the constituency since 1987, usually winning sizeable majorities. However, this was slashed considerably in 2019 when he won by an 11.9% margin.

The Lib Dems became the largest group on Wokingham Borough Council following the 2023 local elections, continuing a trend of gradually chipping away at the council which was run outright by the Conservatives from 2002–2022. The Lib Dems would do well to court the Hong Kong BNO vote in Wokingham on the quest to gain the seat from one of the current longest-serving MPs.

South Cambridgeshire

South Cambridgeshire has been Conservative since its creation in 1997, but the gap between newly-selected Anthony Browne MP and his closest competitor (the Lib Dems) was cut to a narrow 4.3%

¹⁹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63280519

²⁰ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-63722203

²¹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-66925669



margin in 2019. Hong Kong Watch estimates that there will be at least 700 Hong Kong BNO voters in the constituency by the time of next year's election.

Concern over the presence of Chinese-state owned and connected companies at the University of Cambridge and Cambridge Science Park will be a key issue for many Hong Kongers who have moved to the area.²² Candidates would do well to campaign on a platform which aims to critically analyse the risks associated with doing business with Chinese companies, particularly in the technology and science sector.

Winchester

Steve Brine MP has represented Winchester continuously since 2010, but recently announced that he would be standing down at the next election.²³ Despite strong wins in 2015 and 2017, Brine's margin of victory for the Conservatives was cut to 985 votes in 2019 and the seat looks close to switching back to the Liberal Democrat control of 1997–2010.

Nearby Southampton has a significant and active BNO community and one of the key issues of concern is personal safety and security after Hong Kong protesters were allegedly attacked by Chinese activists in June 2023 following a rally to mark the anniversary of the 2019 protests for democratic changes in Hong Kong.²⁴

²² https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cambridge-university-to-end-partnership-with-chinese-missiles-companyfwshmm6mc

²³ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-66001826

 $^{^{24}\,\}underline{\text{https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/12/hong-kong-protesters-allegedly-attacked-chinese-activists-southampton}$



Annex

Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond MP, Conservative) (91.9% of the constituency will go to the new **Wimbledon** constituency under the proposed boundary changes)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Stephen	20,373	38.4	-8.1
	Hammond			
Liberal	Paul Kohler	19,745	37.2	+22.7
Democrats				
Labour	Jackie Schneider	12,543	23.7	-11.9
Independent	Graham Hadley	366	0.7	New
	Majority	628	1.2	-9.7
Turnout		53,027	77.7	+0.5
Registered electors		68,232		
Conservative hold		Swing	-15.4	

Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn MP, Conservative)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Elliot Colburn	20,822	42.4	+4.1
Liberal	Tom Brake	20,193	41.1	+0.1
Democrats				
Labour	Ahmad Wattoo	6,081	12.4	-6.0
Brexit Party	James	1,043	2.1	New
	Woudhuysen			
Green	Tracey Hague	759	1.5	+0.5
CPA	Ashley Dickenson	200	0.4	0
	Majority	629	1.3	
Turnout		49,098	67.3	-4.3
I	Registered electors	72,926		
Conservative §	gain from Lib Dems			

Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully MP, Conservative) (99.7% of the constituency will go to the new **Sutton and Cheam** constituency under the proposed boundary changes)

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Paul Scully	25,235	50.0	-1.1
Liberal	Hina Bokhari	16,884	33.4	+6.7
Democrats				
Labour	Bonnie Craven	7,200	14.3	-6.2
Green	Claire Jackson-	1,168	2.3	+0.6
	Prior			
Majority		8,351	16.5	-7.8
Turnout		50,487	70.4	-3.4
Conservative hold		Swing	-3.9	



Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken MP, Conservative) (97.8% of the constituency will go to the new **Cities of London and Westminster** constituency under the proposed boundary changes)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Nickie Aiken	17,049	39.9	-6.7
Liberal	Chuka Umunna	13,096	30.7	+19.6
Democrats				
Labour	Gordon Nardell	11,624	27.2	-11.2
Green	Zack Polanski	728	1.7	-0.4
CPA	Jill McLachlan	125	0.3	New
Liberal	Dirk van Heck	101	0.2	New
	Majority	3,953	9.2	+1.0
	Turnout	42,723	67.1	+4.3
	Conservative hold	Swing		

Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer MP, Conservative)

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Mike Freer	24,162	43.8	-3.2
Liberal	Luciana Berger	17,600	31.9	+25.3
Democrats				
Labour	Ross Houston	13,347	24.2	-19.6
	Majority		11.9	+8.7
Turnout		55,109	71.0	-0.4
Registered electors		77,573		
Conservative hold		Swing	-14.2	

Cheadle (Mary Robinson MP, Conservative)

2019 result

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Mary Robinson	25,694	46.0	+1.4
Liberal	Tom Morrison	23,358	41.8	+5.5
Democrats				
Labour	Zahid Chauhan	6,851	12.3	-6.8
Majority		2,336	4.2	-4.1
Turnout		55,903	74.9	+0.6
Conservative hold		Swing	-2.0	



Guildford (Angela Richardson MP, Conservative) (74.4% of the constituency will go to the new **Guildford** constituency)

2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Angela	26,317	44.9	-9.7
	Richardson			
Liberal	Zöe Franklin	22,980	39.2	+15.3
Democrats				
Labour	Anne Rouse	4,515	7.7	-11.3
Independent	Anne Milton	4,356	7.4	N/A
Peace	John Morris	483	0.8	+0.4
Majority		3,337	5.7	-25.0
Turnout		58,651	75.5	+1.8
	Conservative hold	Swing	-12.5	

Wokingham (John Redwood MP, Conservative) (52.2% of the constituency will go to the new Wokingham constituency; 35.1% will go to the new Earley and Woodley constituency) 2019 result:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	John Redwood	30,734	49.6	-7.0
Liberal	Phillip Lee	23,351	37.7	+21.8
Democrats				
Labour	Annette	6,450	10.4	-14.7
	Medhurst			
Green	Kizzi Johannessen	1,382	2.2	-0.1
Advance	Annabel Mullin	80	0.1	New
Majority		7,383	11.9	-19.6
Turnout		61,997	73.8	-1.6
	Conservative hold	Swing	-14.4	

South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne MP, Conservative) (61.2% will go to the new South Cambridgeshire constituency; 33% will go to the new St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire constituency)

2019 results:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Anthony Browne	31,015	46.3	-5.5
Liberal	Ian Sollom	28,111	42.0	+23.4
Democrats				
Labour	Dan Greef	7,803	11.7	-15.5
Majority		2,904	4.3	-20.3
Turnout		66,929	76.7	+0.5
	Conservative hold	Swing	-14.4	



Winchester (Steve Brine MP, Conservative) (80% will go to the new **Winchester** constituency; 20% will go to the new **Eastleigh** constituency)

2019 results:

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
Conservative	Steve Brine	28,430	48.3	-3.7
Liberal	Paula Ferguson	27,445	46.6	+12.1
Democrats				
Labour	George Baker	2,723	4.6	-5.9
Justice & Anti-	Teresa Skelton	292	0.5	+0.2
Corruption				
	Majority		1.7	-15.8
Turnout		58,890	77.9	-1.1
	Conservative hold		-7.9	