

South East Regional Executive Committee, Saturday 10 June 2023

The committee is still meeting online, partly because London is the only practicable location and we can no longer use the national HQ. The new south-east office will be in Rochester, but regional director Teddy Ryan stressed that staff will be out in the marginals, not stuck behind desks. Energetic fundraising had allowed the recruitment of many new organisers, with most battleground seats now covered. As a member of the panel which allocates money from the NEC funds (a share of subscription income formerly returned to CLPs) I can confirm that the southeast is among the most effective regions in winning support.

The May elections saw unprecedented numbers of Labour councillors and councils gained, including Medway, Bracknell Forest, Dover, Gravesham, Thanet and Brighton & Hove. Our chair Vince Maple achieved national fame with his victory run in Medway:

(https://twitter.com/Kent_Online/status/1654367501612994560?t=ml6_M7ng1O-5wVQZhu9-aw&s=19).

New Forest elected its first-ever Labour district councillor, and in Spelthorne the Conservatives were reduced from 35 seats out of 39 to just 12, with Labour now up to seven. However work was needed to improve the situation in Slough.

On the campaign members reported that effective organisation, accurate data and ruthless targeting were critical to Labour's success, with both turnout and the swing to Labour higher in marginal wards. There was no point in piling up votes in safe Labour seats while losing others by a whisker, and even initial sceptics were now persuaded. The electorate were well able to understand and use tactical voting, and the new requirement for photo-ID seemed to discourage more elderly Tory voters than supporters of other parties, though this is being analysed further. Help from London activists was much appreciated, and will be repaid in the Uxbridge by-election and the 2024 mayoral and assembly elections.

I asked about post-election arrangements in councils with no overall control, where decisions were made by a three-person NEC panel. In Cherwell the Conservatives lost their majority and Labour, as the largest opposition party, would have expected the leadership. However the LibDems and Greens voted Labour's candidate down, so unfortunately the Tories continue as a minority administration. In Lewes a proposal for Labour, LibDems and Greens to run the council jointly made no sense because between them they held all 41 seats, leaving no opposition. Labour is now in a "co-operative alliance" with the Greens.

Teddy was planning a training day for new councillors, and regional versions of the Jo Cox women in leadership programme and training for BAME members were in the pipeline. These would be intended mainly for potential parliamentary candidates, but the region could also offer "be a candidate" sessions for areas looking for new councillors..

Looking Forward

The regional team are keen to get candidates for the May 2024 local elections in place this autumn, before general election preparations start in earnest. They are willing to organise interviews for all candidates, including sitting councillors, and this was welcomed as likely to improve consistency and objectivity.

Parliamentary candidates had been chosen for most Labour and target seats, though Worthing was awaiting the final boundary commission report. Of the 65 more distant prospects 17 were ready for sign-off, and no, I don't know which ones they are. The NEC has produced streamlined procedures, but if every hustings required a regional officer it would be hard to complete them during 2023, especially with so many by-elections running. In previous rounds REC members have supervised these selections, and I believe this should continue. Current plans are to delay selecting in borderline seats to see how the political situation develops, but I am concerned that this will give candidates too little time to establish themselves.

Meanwhile the boundary commission will deliver its final decisions on 1 July. The regional director had written to all CLPs where at least 15% of their membership was likely to be affected, asking them to postpone their AGMs, while the others can continue as usual. Formally the old CLPs will be dissolved at the end of annual conference, with new CLPs coming into existence the following day, 12 October 2023, but much preparatory work on membership, finances, property and staff should be done over the summer. A handbook covering every aspect of reorganisation was due by 20 June. I stressed that to implement a smooth transition, CLPs must have access via Organise and the new Admin Hub to members on both old and new boundaries well before conference, so we can establish new branches and structures and invite the correct people to the correct meetings. I am still not sure that this is fully understood.

Regional Conference Deferred

Finally the committee agreed to defer the regional conference from autumn 2023 to February / March 2024. The problem with 2023 is that CLPs would have to elect delegates on their old boundaries, but the new boundaries would be in effect by the date of the conference and accountability would be lost. Instead the new CLPs can elect their delegates after annual conference. The regional director will discuss detailed arrangements with the chair Vince Maple and vice-chairs Maureen Cleator and myself.

Future REC meetings will be held on Saturdays 9 September and 9 December 2023.

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