

OPINIUM / LBC FOCUS GROUPS

Understanding what former Labour voters are thinking in the

MAKERFIELD BY-ELECTION

07

Op
Opinium

Insights
with impact

JUNE 2026

The 2026 Makerfield by-election

Andy Burnham enters the final days of the Makerfield campaign as the narrow favourite to win, with Opinium polling giving him a 5-point lead over Reform UK's Robert Kenyon.

Yet the race also highlights a deeper challenge for Labour.

Nearly one in five (18%) 2024 Labour voters now say they will back Reform's Robert Kenyon on Thursday, while wider polling suggests the seat could become vulnerable at a future general election if current trends continue.

To understand what is behind that movement, Opinium and LBC conducted a series of focus groups with former Labour voters considering, or already making, the switch to Reform.



The key insights from our focus groups

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LABOUR NO LONGER
THE DEFAULT

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LESSONS FOR LABOUR
AND REFORM

Labour is no longer the automatic choice for many former supporters

Many participants described a long history of voting Labour, often driven more by habit, family tradition, or familiarity than strong ideological attachment. However, these voters increasingly described assessing parties on perceived performance and outcomes rather than loyalty.

While Labour remains a consideration for some softer supporters, others no longer see it as a viable option, suggesting the party is losing its status as the default political home for these voters.

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"I've generally voted Labour just out of force of habit."

Male, 38, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

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"[I'd been] brought up to support Labour because they are, or was, for the working man."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

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"Just like family, they've voted it and I've sort of followed suit."

Male, 38, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

Some ex-Labour voters remain persuadable while others appear lost

Participants across both focus groups shared many of the same frustrations, particularly around trust, public services, immigration and the direction of the country. What differed was the extent to which they still viewed Labour as a viable option.

While softer ex-Labour voters continued to weigh Labour against Reform, harder defectors spoke in much more definitive terms about abandoning the party. This points to a growing divide between wavering voters and those whose break with Labour appears more settled.

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“I'd probably go Labour, I think, based on the person. But whether his actions would come through would remain to be seen. But as a person, I would vote Andy Burnham.”

Female, 40s, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

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“No, whatever talking head is there, it's the party as a whole. If you're in the party, you know the manifesto, you know the agenda, and as far as I'm concerned, you're complicit, You're over. That's it. It's gone. So no more Labour for me.”

Female, 50s, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Reform is becoming the default destination for disillusioned Labour voters

Participants frequently framed their support for Reform in terms of disappointment with Labour rather than enthusiasm for Reform itself. For many, Reform represented change, protest and a break from politics as usual.

However, perceptions of a two-horse race appear to reinforce this shift. Once Labour is ruled out, Reform often becomes the default choice, while smaller parties struggle to be seen as credible alternatives.

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"I don't want Labour in. It's as simple as that. I'm voting, you know, the tactical way. I don't want Labour in. Anybody but them."

Female, 50s, ex-Labour voter now voting Reform

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"It's all why we're voting Reform. It's the only way it makes a difference... it's probably what Labour aren't doing, to be fair."

Male, 40s, ex-Labour voter now voting Reform

Immigration has become a proxy for wider concerns about fairness and control

Immigration was one of the most consistently raised issues across both groups. However, participants also often used it as a way of expressing wider concerns about pressure on public services, fairness, safety and whether government is in control.



"Too many people coming in... and we can't even get a dentist."

Female, 50s, ex-Labour voter now voting Reform



"Labour are not even mentioning nothing. They're pretty much trying to still defend what they've done."

Male, 40s, ex-Labour voter now voting Reform

"[Reform is] the only one that seems to be making more of a fuss about it."

Male, 38, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

Safety and insecurity are shaping how voters judge politics

Across both groups, participants described a growing sense of insecurity in their local communities, often pointing to crime, disorder and a lack of confidence in public institutions. These concerns appeared particularly strong among participants who had already moved towards Reform.

Participants rarely viewed these issues in isolation. Instead, concerns about safety were closely connected to wider feelings of decline, loss of control and a belief that the system is no longer protecting people or responding to their concerns.

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"I just don't feel safe in the area, in the country... I don't feel safe enough for my children to go out and play."

Female, 41, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

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"I'll tell you what would make me feel safe: if police did their job correctly."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Everyday experiences are driving perceptions of national decline

Participants often judged politics through the lens of their daily lives rather than through ideology or party loyalty. Pressures on public services, rising living costs and visible changes in their local communities were frequently cited as evidence that things are moving in the wrong direction.

These concerns felt immediate and personal rather than abstract. As a result, dissatisfaction with politics appears rooted in lived experience, making it more emotionally powerful and harder to shift through messaging alone.

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"The change in the litter, the police, the graffiti, the homeless, and the drinking, and the drugs in the town, and all the town shops boarded up."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

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"We've been told this since 2019 that they were going to fix the NHS and they've not fixed the NHS."

Female, 45, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

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"Everything's getting more expensive. The cost of things seems to be going up, but my wage not."

Male, 31, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Low trust in politics is creating space for Reform

Participants expressed deep scepticism about politicians of all parties, often questioning whether any party would deliver on its promises. Trust appeared low across the political spectrum, rather than being directed at one particular party.

However, Reform appears to benefit from being seen as more credible and less disappointing than Labour. For these voters, Reform does not need to be fully trusted to be politically attractive.

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"All politicians lie, they do. I always remember my nana saying, don't ever, never trust a politician. Never."

Female, 61, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

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"That's my only fear they're [Reform] giving us this information, this manifesto, what they've got, but then they won't follow it through."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

“

"I'll never fully trust any politician."

Male, 31, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Andy Burnham keeps Labour competitive, but he cannot completely escape the Labour brand

Among wavering former Labour voters, Burnham helps keep Labour in the conversation. Participants often described him as more authentic, more capable and more connected to local concerns than the national Labour Party.

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"If they said Andy Burnham will probably be the next Prime Minister. Yeah, I'd probably vote for him."

Female, 61, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

"If Andy Burnham wasn't in the mix, I'd be going Reform, I think."

Female, 41, ex-Labour voter but undecided on by-election

However, Burnham's appeal has limits. Among participants who had already moved towards Reform, dissatisfaction with Labour ran deeper than leadership and was directed at the party as a whole.

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"Whoever is up there talking on behalf, fronting Labour at the minute, is spouting lies. So it could be anyone."

Male, 40, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Winning back former supporters will require rebuilding trust, not simply changing policy positions

IF LABOUR REMEMBERS ONE QUOTE



"No, whatever talking head is there, it's the party as a whole. If you're in the party, you know the manifesto, you know the agenda, and as far as I'm concerned, you're complicit. You're over. That's it. It's gone. So no more Labour for me."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Reform's support is being fuelled by dissatisfaction with Labour, but remains vulnerable if expectations are not met

IF REFORM REMEMBERS ONE QUOTE



"That's my only fear they're [Reform] giving us this information, this manifesto, what they've got, but then they won't follow it through."

Female, 58, ex-Labour voter voting Reform in by-election

Our approach

This research is qualitative and not intended to be statistically representative.

Its value lies in understanding how voters describe their choices, concerns and political journeys in their own words.

METHODOLOGY

- Two online focus groups with former Labour voters in Makerfield
- Conducted 8–9 June 2026
- 7 participants across two 90-minute discussions
- All participants were Makerfield residents
- All had previously voted Labour
- Participants had either voted Reform in the 2026 local elections, or were considering voting Reform in the upcoming by-election

GROUP ONE

Softer ex-Labour voters

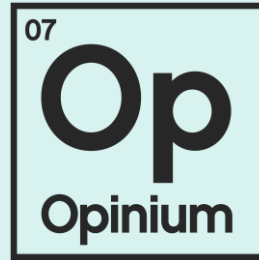
- 4 participants
- Deciding between Labour and Reform
- Labour remained within their choice set

GROUP TWO

Harder defectors

- 3 participants
- Intending to vote Reform
- More emotionally detached from Labour

THANK **YOU!**



Insights with impact

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