

Exploring political sentiment in the Makerfield by-election

An immersive study

11th June 2026

Executive Summary

- **Restore are a significant presence in this by-election.**
- **Tactical voting is in play, but debates on this are most noticeably on the right.**
- **Immigration and the cost of living are the two biggest issues.**
- **Andy Burnham's name recognition is giving Labour a big boost but support is still lukewarm.**
- **Burnham's brand is weakened by perceptions that Makerfield is a stepping stone.**
- **The Bee Network was widely seen as Burnham's greatest achievement.**
- **He was criticised for the Clean Air Zone.**
- **However, no other candidate has his name recognition.**
- **High street decline, housebuilding and anti-social behaviour are the biggest local issues.**

Headlines

Restore are a significant presence in this by-election. While relatively few people who spoke positively about Restore said they would actually vote for the party, largely down to the risk of splitting the right, name recognition was very high. This also extended to its leader, with people regularly bringing up Rupert Lowe's name unprompted and with affection when discussing Restore. Recognition was highest among older voters, but was equal among men and women. It was noticeably lower among under 40s. Voters most tempted by Restore were typically those who had voted for Reform previously and felt immigration was the biggest issue facing the country.

"When it was just Labour and Reform, I was like, easy, I know exactly who to vote for, and it won't be Labour...then now when Rupert brought Rebecca [the local candidate] along I was like, "Oh no, I actually don't know what to do now." - Woman, 40s, Hindley

"Reform and Restore, I think the policies are very similar, aren't they? I don't know what to make of it all. A lot of it does sound good...they're for the British people and trying to stop immigration, which I think's a big thing at the moment." - Woman, 50s, Ashton

"I don't like Farage, I just don't trust him. All the Brexit, all the UKIP stuff, always changing. I like what Rupert Lowe is saying, and I'm not a racist, not in any way." - Man, 70s, Ashton

"I will vote, either Restore or Reform, not sure which, I haven't decided yet. Had a lot of [Restore] canvassers, the woman [candidate] was very nice." - Woman, 60s, Hindley

Tactical voting is in play, but debates on this are taking place most noticeably on the right. People in Makerfield are aware of the perceived high stakes around the by-election, and that it is effectively a two-horse race between Reform and Labour. For right-leaning voters, this gave pause for some who said they would consider voting for Restore but said they would likely vote 'tactically' to keep out Labour. There was almost no mention of the Greens, Tories or Lib Dems. There was one 2024 Green voter in our research, who was leaning towards Andy Burnham in the context of this election.

"I am on the fence completely [between Restore and Reform]. I'm completely on the fence because I don't want to split it and let Andy Burnham in." - Woman, 40s, Hindley

"Rupert's right, but his rhetoric is too harsh for the majority of middle of the road people so we have to realise that he is splitting the vote." - Man, 60s, Ashton

"I usually vote for the Green Party but it scares me the thought of a Reform government getting in so I think maybe tactical vote so that they don't get in." - Woman, 30s, Orrell

Immigration and the cost of living are the two biggest issues on people's minds. Immigration was by far the most emotive issue among right-leaning voters, but also among a large number of undecided former Labour voters. It was also the chief criticism aimed at the current Labour government, alongside frustration at the ongoing cost of living crisis. Interestingly, despite the research taking place directly in the aftermath of the Henry Nowak controversy and the immigration debate it triggered, there was little unpromoted mention of this in our conversations. Welfare was also raised as an issue regularly in conversation, particularly by right leaning voters.

"Give us our country back...it's not fair on our children growing up." - Woman, 40s, Ashton

"We're being treated like second class citizens in our own country. I don't believe in illegal immigration, that has got to stop, and it wouldn't be happening anywhere else." - Woman 70s, Ashton

"I think the benefits system needs a complete overhaul. Because I work for a living, and there's people who don't work - 'Anxiety!' - I get it, mental health conditions, etc. But, there's got to be a line with it...It's easier to not work. You're shafted basically if you work." - Woman, 40s, Orrell

Andy Burnham's name recognition is very strong, and is giving Labour a big boost - but that said, support was still lukewarm. Those intending to vote Labour often said they were voting for 'Andy Burnham' as opposed to the Labour Party (who were deeply unpopular). As one of the most prominent political figures in the North, Burnham was seen by many as an important advocate for a region that often feels overlooked by Westminster and for working people more widely. However, beyond a minority of Labour voters, the strong personal following often associated with him in Manchester is a lot less pronounced in Makerfield than might have been expected - with many voters ambivalent towards him. It was widely acknowledged that he was planning to challenge the PM and voters who were tempted by him - and even many who weren't - had no problem with this. Almost nobody stood up for Keir Starmer and said he should stay in the job.



“Well, my initial thoughts were Labour is just not doing the right thing by us, but then Andy changes things a little bit. But sometimes I lean a little bit towards Reform, but then they’re a little bit extreme as well in some of the ideas...” - Woman, 50, Ashton

“Heading towards Andy Burnham [to vote]. [Why is that?] I think he’s the best of a bad bunch if I’m honest with you...I think Andy Burnham’s policies for me are probably best. [And what do you think Andy stands for?] The people, definitely.” - Woman 50s, Ashton

“I think that the Reform vote is just purely that, isn’t it? It’s stop the boats, and stop the immigrants...I think the big thing for an Andy Burnham point of view is, if he can get into Parliament and sort of right the mistakes that have been made under Labour...because I think a lot of people feel massively let down by Labour since they’ve come in.” - Man, 50s, Ashton

“I think he stands for local people and he’s got people’s interests at heart...” - Woman, 50s, Ashton

Burnham’s political brand is somewhat weakened by the perception that he might be using Makerfield as a stepping stone to a bigger national role. For undecided and wavering voters, the same prospect raised doubts about his commitment to the constituency and whether Makerfield would remain his priority. These concerns were amplified by the presence of a Reform candidate who could make a similarly credible claim to local roots, reducing Burnham’s advantage on questions of local identity and connection to the area. However, for some, the prospect of their local MP being Prime Minister was a positive thing.

“He’s using it as a stepping stone to get to Westminster, he’s Mayor of Manchester, if he doesn’t win he will just go back to being mayor.” - Woman, 70s, Ashton

“I mean, everybody says it is a stepping stone to become Prime Minister, probably is...but come on, look at Keir Starmer.” - Woman, 50s, Ashton

“It’s probably our only chance to actually have somebody from this area as Prime Minister. You never ever get it. They’re always public school boys, Eton and Oxford and Cambridge...The guy’s lived here most of his life, his kids went to school with my kids...” - Man, 50s, Ashton

Transport - particularly the Bee Network - was widely seen as Burnham’s greatest achievement. While many participants struggled to identify a specific policy agenda or overarching vision associated with him, the Bee Network was consistently cited as the most visible and impactful legacy of his leadership. Although transport itself was not a particularly salient voting issue, several participants said that the success of the Bee Network would be enough to persuade them to support Burnham, as it demonstrated his ability to articulate a clear policy, deliver it effectively, and provide residents with a practical improvement to their daily lives.

“I like how he’s put things back into the public, like the bus networks and things. I think a lot of our infrastructure and stuff was sold off to private sectors. It’s obviously cost a fortune, and more will go in that direction...taking it back under local control and government control will be better.” - Woman, 30s, Orrell



“What he's done for Manchester, if you look at my kids, when they were at college they got free bus passes, they could ride anywhere in Manchester, 16 to 18 year olds...got the Bee Network in.” - Man, 50s, Ashton

The attempted Clean Air Zone was cited negatively by voters, as well as suggestions he was too driven by likeability. The proposed Clean Air Zone was frequently cited as an example of Burnham not representing working class voters. With participants here suggesting it would have hit this group hardest. Among other voters, the clean air zone was also referenced as an example of him failing to push through with contentious policies.

“Andy Burnham's all over it at the moment, but a lot of people have not forgiven him for the clean air tax he wanted to bring in. He wanted to tax people to go to work. A lot of people won't forgive him for that.” - Man, 50s, Ashton

However, no other candidate has Burnham's name recognition. Though many residents had decided to vote Reform or were sympathetic to the party, very few could identify Robert Kenyon as the candidate. Among those who knew him by name, opinion was split. Sympathetic voices highlighted that Kenyon was also a 'local lad', challenging Burnham's monopoly on knowing the area and representing its best interests. However, critical residents were more likely to highlight Kenyon's lack of in-depth knowledge of Reform policies, casting doubt on his suitability for elected office.

“It's an uneven playing field, the local lad [Robert Kenyon] versus the career politician [Andy Burnham]. Burnham's always been angling for the big job.” - Man, 50s, Winstanley

High street decline, housebuilding and anti-social behaviour are the biggest local issues. Many residents in Ashton in particular highlighted antisocial behaviour by young adults in the town centre as a recurring issue and wanted to see more police action to deal with it. Alongside this was the regular complaint of high street decline across the constituency. There were mixed views on housebuilding with some residents wanting to see more houses for younger people, while others discussed the additional pressure on local services.

“There are too many vape shops, they don't pay business rates, they don't give anything back or contribute to the community.” - Woman, 50s, Ashton

“When there's a group of kids, it's very intimidating....and there doesn't seem to be a lot being done about that at this moment, it keeps getting brought up in all the local groups.” - Woman, 50s, Ashton

“The amount of houses that are being built, the amount of pressure on doctors in the area, school places...we're getting so many new houses built around here, I signed up for a nursery when I was 20 weeks pregnant, which is just mental.” - Woman, 30s, Orrell



Methodology

Public First conducted one-day of immersive research in Makerfield (4th June 2026). The research included a team of four researchers visiting locations across the constituency, speaking with local residents in cafes, pubs, high streets, and shops. Locations included the Ashton-in-Makerfield town centre, Hindley, Orrell, and Winstanley, ensuring a spread of wards were included. In total, the team spoke to 53 local residents.

In immersive research, we send researchers into particular locations for much longer periods of time than is typical, rather than an evening (typical for focus groups). The aim is to speak to people who would never engage in ordinary political research - either qual or quant - in their most natural environments and therefore to get their gut reactions to politics. Our research is data-led: our researchers are guided by the analysis our data team pulls together about the location in question in advance (voting intention, demographics etc).

Given the nature of this project, it was very important to reach beyond the more politically engaged and speak to the mass of voters who would never attend a focus group or fill in an online survey. All the conversations, however, were informed by one shared discussion guide to allow for consistency and comparison. Interviews and participant demographics were tracked throughout.

