GREEN HOUSE THINK TANK

Post 2024 General Election Survey

Analysis of Themes emerging from responses to Green House Think Tank's July 2024 Survey

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Green House is an independent think tank which works to develop green thinking and to resource and challenge Greens across the UK. Part of Green House Think Tank's role is to critically assess the green political landscape in terms of how it advances the green movement more broadly. This survey was part of that work. See greenhousethinktank.org to find out how Green House is funded or to donate to support our work.

Unlike other countries, the UK does not have a specific legal structure for political foundations so Green House Think Tank is incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. Unlike the EU, the UK does not have a system of public funding for political education or political policy development, so Green House Think Tank has no formal tie to UK Green Parties.

Survey

Green House ran an online survey from 15th July to 28th August 2024 which asked respondents five open questions about how they feel Green Parties performed in the 2024 General Election and what the campaign has brought out in terms of tensions, questions around priorities, political strategies, and governance issues:

Q1: *What do you think Green Parties got right in their approach to the General Election?*

Q2: *What do you think Green Parties got wrong in their approach to the General Election? Where can lessons be learnt? Where is a different approach needed?*

Q3: *What tensions has the General Election revealed within Green Parties (specify which)?*

Q4: *Do you think that Green Parties' political strategies are appropriate/sufficient in response to the severity of our current ecological and social predicament?*

Q5: *What do you think should be Green Parties' top priorities? (What Strategy or Governance changes or other activities should be prioritised?)*

The survey and this report were not commissioned by any of the Green Parties although the main authors are members of the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW).

Analytical Approach

The methodology was largely qualitative and takes an inductive approach to identifying themes. Within the report, a quantitative analysis is only provided for Q4 which was posed in a way which elicited sufficiently clear responses to enable this. Broad themes emerged from across the set of questions. These themes have been grouped to highlight areas which members and governing bodies of Green Parties might wish to explore further. It should also be noted that, whilst the themes described have been developed from the data, only the main themes that were raised in the survey responses have been reflected in this publication.

Introduction

The 2024 General Election saw a number of significant gains for the Green Parties of the United Kingdom. Through the adoption of a 'target to win' electioneering strategy, the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) increased their parliamentary representation from a single MP in Brighton Pavilion to four MPs: Brighton Pavilion, Bristol Central, Waveney Valley and North Herefordshire. Meanwhile, the Scottish Greens increased their vote share in the General Election from 1% to 3.8% and stood a record number of candidates. In Northern Ireland, they managed to increase their vote share by over 5 times to 1.1%.[1] Collectively, Green Parties across the UK received more votes than at any previous general election, gaining over 1.9 million votes.[2]

This has been heralded as a significant achievement. However, the question remains of how this vote share can be harnessed to effect real change; a question explored by Green House founding member Rupert Read in his recent article looking at potential pathways for the four Green MPs of England and Wales[3]. The election campaign was also subject to tensions from across the spectrum of Green Parties' voters. The survey discussed in this article sought to tease out these tensions by exposing patterns of thought and disagreements across the Green Parties, both to inform the ongoing efforts of existing MPs, and to build off their momentum to achieve even greater success in future elections.

Survey Respondents

The survey was targeted primarily at members, councillors and parliamentary candidates of Green Parties in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England although responses from non-member supporters of Green Parties were also accepted. To enable respondents to speak freely in their answers, the survey explicitly said that no quotes would be attributed to individuals. Instead, they are attributed by party and role within that party.

63 responses were received to the survey, many giving rich and detailed reflections on the questions posed. The majority were from were members of Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) (50 responses) with a smaller number received from members of the Scottish Greens and Irish Green Party/Green Party Northern Ireland (GPNI). Respondents included councillors, council leaders, parliamentary candidates, spokespeople, current and former members of GPEW Executive and Regional Council, as well as members and supporters of UK Green Parties without a formal role.[4] Some were current or former elected officers, and several were policy working group members and convenors.

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1   2024 General Election Results compared to 2019 – <u>House of Common's Library</u> p20
2   6.8% in 2024 compared to 3.4% in 2015 – <u>House of Common's Library</u> p20
3   <u>Read, R. (2024). The true power of the Green Party is now: to admit our own powerlessness to 'save the world'</u>
4   In total there were 6 responses from Green Supporters who weren't a member of any Green Party.
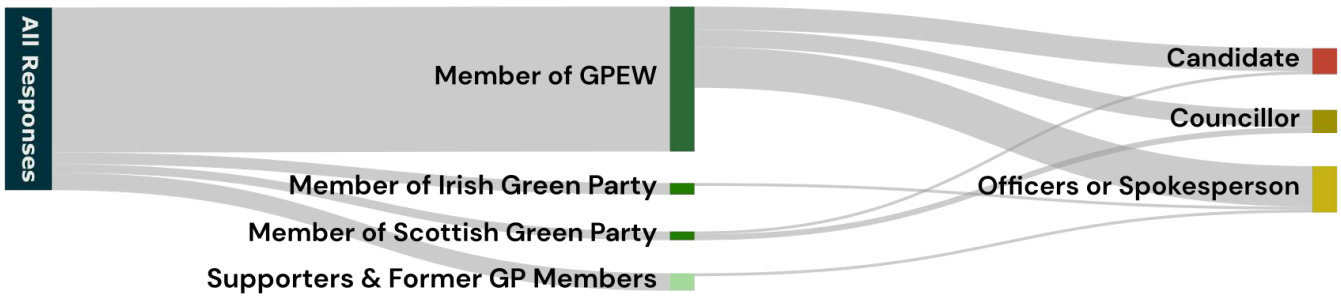
Overview of 2024 Post General Election Survey Respondents

Key Findings and Discussion

Three broad and inter-connected themes emerged through analysis of the survey responses. These themes speak to three significant questions about the Green Parties' role within the broader political and economic systems, around which this article's analysis is structured.

1:   **What is the purpose of a Green political party, and should it be different from other political parties?**

This theme arises from the clearly felt tension between electioneering and policy making. It explores the question of whether these two purposes of the party must necessarily be at odds in the way that survey respondents currently perceive them to be. For example, the Labour Party's Rule Book implies an electorally focussed strategy to gaining and holding political power: "to organise and maintain in Parliament and in the country a political Labour Party".[5] By contrast, the GPEW expresses a remit broader than electoral success:

> "a) to develop and implement ecological policies consistent with the Philosophical Basis of the Party as expressed in Policies for a Sustainable Society;
> b) to that end to win seats at all levels of government; ..." – GPEW Constitution
>
> "We do not believe that there is only one way to change society, or that we have all the answers. We seek to be part of a wider green movement that works for these principles through a variety of means. We generally support those who use reasonable and non-violent forms of direct action to further just aims." – GPEW Philosophical Basis

Responses to this post-election survey seem to reflect a desire for this wider purpose; for Green Parties to stand for something more than just achieving electoral success. The responses suggest that there is a tension around these two functions as survey participants contend with how resources should be distributed between acquiring power and creating and advocating for policies. There is similar concern about what to do with power once acquired.

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5   Labour Party 2020 Rule Book.

2. How might Green Parties balance reflecting the views of the general public with seeking to shape those views?

This theme explores the purpose of green political parties insofar as it questions whether parties should win elections by reflecting the electorate's immediate concerns, or whether they should lead the electorate towards their vision of the future.[6] The latter option may also entail telling uncomfortable truths about what changes are required. One way this tension reveals itself is in the mixed views on whether an ecological message should be prioritised, in line with parties' founding philosophy, or whether Green Parties should embed this within a much broader range of policies, to both bring about this sustainable vision **and** to address the more pressing and immediate concerns that voters have today.

In the survey responses, this found expression both in disagreements over the manifesto for the 2024 general election and in discussions of what Green Parties should prioritise going forward. As membership and vote share increases, this question becomes increasingly salient and raises the underlying question of how much a party should evolve and shift position versus adhering to original principles. Inevitably too, as a party grows, diverse views emerge within the membership on what the central principles are and how much weight is given to each principle. An example raised by survey respondents was around the perceived influx of voters defecting from Labour to GPEW in response to the parties' relative positions on Gaza.

Another source of tension also arises around the newly elected MPs: how should they balance their individual priority to represent local constituency interests with Green Parties' collective manifesto commitments and policies, where these are potentially in conflict? This is not a new tension for MPs of other parties but, if Green Parties are to be different, does their approach entail different considerations?

3: To what extent should Green Parties model the society they wish to see?

Consideration of Green Party internal governance was prompted by some of the questions in the survey. This reveals difficulties, the resolution of which might prefigure how Green Parties might manage a wider societal shift. The key questions that arise here are how to reconcile being a party built on localism with increasing power at national level, and how to manage disagreement within a party. Issues coming into play are around democracy, representation, collaboration, cooperation and the ability to co-exist with disagreement. Green Parties might wish to pay close attention to the model they present to the general public. As the electorate seeks to understand where to place its trust, how Green Parties conduct their own affairs will be closely scrutinised.

The following sections flesh out these three themes using illustrative quotes from survey respondents.

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[6]   This tension is particular pronounced with First-Past-the-Post electoral systems and less critical in, for example, Scottish Assembly elections where Greens hold regional list rather than constituency seats.

Section One: What is the purpose of a Green political party, and should it be different from other political parties?

Reviewing the detailed reflections given across the five survey questions, a range of opinions can be identified around the very purpose of a Green political party. A majority of respondents interpreted the specific question on 'priorities' through a policy lens. This arose spontaneously and in spite of the question directing respondents more towards issues of governance or strategy. This could suggest that Greens see their parties first and foremost as campaigning for change rather than as tools for gaining or wielding political power. In fact, a tension mentioned by many respondents was around prioritising electioneering or campaigning on matters of policy. The following two quotes illustrate opposing positions around this tension:

> "*The GPEW has constantly put electoralism above campaigning. There has always been a large financial budget for elections and very little resourcing of campaigning*" – Former GPEW Regional Council Member

> "*I strongly believe that we are a political Party and not a pressure group*" – GPEW Executive Member

This tension finds expression in a widespread concern over resources and how these should best be used. As in the first quote above, some feel that financial resources and volunteer time should be used primarily for campaigning on important issues and educating the public, whilst others feel that limited resources mean that winning more seats in Parliament should be the focus (see Section Three).

Consistently, climate change was identified as a key policy area to be prioritised.[7] However, this tended to be expressed in general terms without specific policy responses. This begs the question of whether Green Parties feel they already have a clear common policy response to climate change, or if they continue to grapple with what a sufficient response would actually look like:

> "*Combatting the existential crisis with all means possible. This should be the number one priority, and everything else should come after*" – GPEW Member

> "*Climate Change, The Environment, Clean Energy* "– GPEW Councillor

Other policy priorities were more explicitly stated, for example "*Rejoin the EU*" – GPEW 2015 candidate, or "*Public funding for health and arts*" – Irish Green Party member.

The question over the purpose of a green political party relates significantly to the next theme. Section Two explores the extent to which the views of the general public should direct the policies of the Green Parties, versus the need for the Parties to expend effort convincing the public to back their policies and the vision they have to offer.

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[7]   Assumed to more broadly refer to humanity's predicament for which climate change is just one symptom, and also referred to in responses using language like 'environmental' or 'ecological'.

Section Two: How might Green Parties balance reflecting the views of the general public with seeking to shape those views?

Several respondents noted that the general public tends not to share the concern about climate that is held by Green Party members:

> "*whilst acknowledgement of the crisis is high, it has to be accepted that the concern is soft*" – GPEW Local Co-ordinator

Some respondents even see talking about radical action on climate as an inherent limitation to electoral success:

> "*Clearly, there is a tension between getting elected and campaigning for climate change*" – GPEW member

This tension tends to result in some people believing that much more needs to be said about the climate emergency, whilst others believe that electoral success is dependent on talking about subjects the of the most immediate concern to voters.

> "*I think no party, including the Green parties, came anywhere close to representing the seriousness of the metacrisis*" – Green Supporter

> "*In our eagerness to respond to voters' actual concerns (NHS, cost of living, potholes, etc) we understated our environmental and climate messages. Some long-time green supporters were irked by this*" – GPEW Campaigns Organiser

The sense that Green Parties may not be offering sufficient strategies to address the crises currently being faced was present in responses to question 4 in the survey. The chart below visualises responses to Q4, coded as sufficient, neutral, or not sufficient.

Do you think that Green Parties' political strategies are appropriate/sufficient in response to the severity of our current eco-logical and social predicament?

| Sufficent | Neutral | Not-Sufficent |

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%
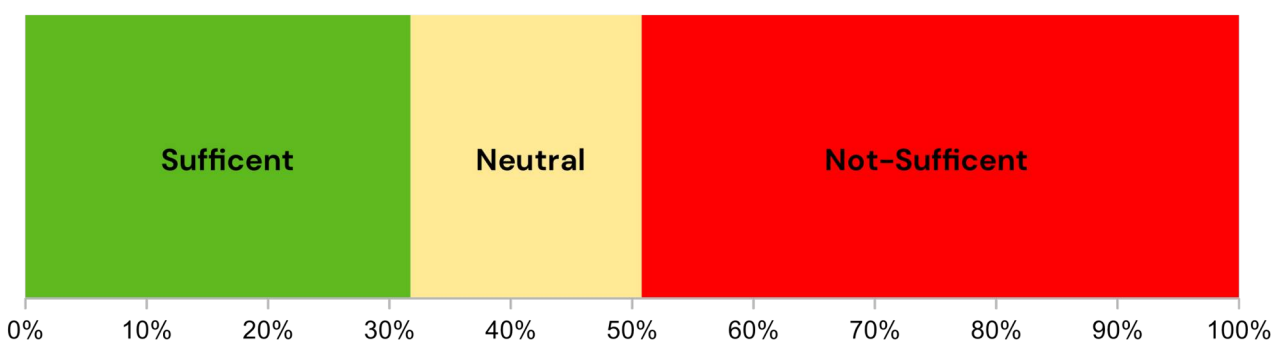
There is concern that, at its most extreme, reflecting people's spoken concerns results in a failure to focus on the big issues. It is worth considering that whilst people might vocalise small concerns, that does not mean they are not, deep-down, also concerned about existential issues such as climate change:

"The difference, for me, is encapsulated in our focus on climate and social justice, compared to the target to win strategy, which focuses on dog poo and flytipping" – GPEW member

This highlights the tensions for Green Parties needing to both represent voters' concerns whilst seeking to shape public discourse – for instance, by linking campaigning on climate with social justice:

"We must bring lower income people with us if we are to avert a climate and nature crisis and show them how we can protect them in the transition period." – GPEW Councillor

"Four MPs give us a better platform, and we should now use this to push for the action needed" – GPEW member

However, some responses were against too much focus on climate, with some respondents expressing that it leads to a perception of Green Parties as white middle-class. Perhaps rather than deprioritising climate, parties need to find a narrative that clarifies how climate is an issue for everyone:

"Much of the media coverage suggests that action on climate change is a choice. We do it if it's not too disruptive or expensive, but we can reduce action when it is too expensive. We need to get the message somehow across that we have no choice. I felt we barely tried" – GPEW member

"Really selling the benefits of their policies to the majority, rather than relying on people already in the green 'bubble'" – Green supporter

The tension between representing views and shaping them also came up with regard to the manifesto writing process within GPEW[8]:

"There was a tension between wanting a strong truthful manifesto to address the environmental ceiling (as per Doughnut Economics) and the desire to appear electorally popular in target seats. This tension was particularly the case where targeting Conservative held seats" – GPEW Member

Although the GPEW manifesto received both praise and criticism in questions about what Green Parties got right in their approach and what could be improved, the responses suggest that different Green Party members judged the manifesto in different ways. One respondent highlighted the many purposes the manifesto was expected to serve by various interested groups. The implication is that no single document can fulfil all these purposes, and a clear consensus should be reached before future manifestos are developed.

"A manifesto is typically a document communicating a party's stance on a range of important topics to the general public. Our manifesto is not. It is a handbook for candidates attending hustings; it is a roadmap for elected representatives for their term; it is a technical document, forming a cross-policy picture and capturing the

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[8]   Not noted by Scottish or Irish Green Party members.

work of the policy development community up to that point; it is also, for some bizarre reason, a way to shoehorn pledges into policy" – GPEW Member

In interpreting respondents' concerns, the question could be how might a manifesto set out policies that Greens think would represent a sufficient response to our predicament, whilst generating support from voters with more immediate concerns? Politicians' reluctance to confront difficult policy areas or contentious decisions head-on could be seen as one reason why society finds itself in its current predicament (see [Green House framing paper on this topic](#)). The survey responses suggest that many Greens feel that Green Parties should differentiate themselves from conventional politics in this regard.

The question of representing public views rather than seeking to shift them also plays out in concerns about how GPEW's four new MPs will manage to represent their constituency interests along with the national policies of the party. Adrian Ramsay, co-leader of the GPEW and MP for Waveney Valley, gained media attention shortly after the election for his position on pylons; something which was raised by survey respondents.[9] The issue is no doubt more complex than is presented by the media, but Adrian was recorded as saying that his priority as an MP was to represent his constituents. Without clear consensus on this balance, there is concern about 'not in my back yard' (NIMBY) arguments being used by Greens. This matters in terms of a perceived divide between urban and rural constituencies.

"*Still perceived as an urban party and only associated rurally with NIMBYism*" – Scottish Greens member

To urban Greens, rural dwellers opposing wind farms or pylons can be seen to be resisting decarbonisation. However, rural citizens have long been disenfranchised and feel that they are lumbered with infrastructure that primarily serves urban citizens.[10] Rural areas remote from London argue that they have seen very little of the economic prosperity of the last 40 years. Whilst pushback against green infrastructure may be perceived as NIMBYism, it may also be motivated by genuine concern about beauty and biodiversity. It raises important questions about the decarbonisation pathway that society should take, how much energy is needed for people to thrive and what appropriate compensation for rural areas hosting infrastructure to serve urban populations looks like.[11]

Linked to a perceived tension between the concerns of urban and rural constituencies, respondents also expressed concern about the challenge of maintaining appeal both to left-leaning citizens in Bristol and Brighton and disgruntled rural (and often conservative leaning) citizens in Waveney Valley and North Herefordshire. This is a tension that is expected to be challenging to manage without compromising core party values. Again, this speaks to the question of how far views are to be reflected or shaped.

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[9]   [Waveney Valley MP says communities must be heard over pylons – BBC News](#)
[10]   [The urban-rural polarisation of political disenchantment in Europe](#) – Bennett Institute for Public Policy – Nov 2020
[11]   If compensation is even an appropriate framing

"The fact that we won two seats; Bristol and Brighton from potential Labour wins and the other two from Conservative hands leaves us in a tricky position"– GPEW Local Party Coordinator

As Green Parties grow, it can be expected that a wider range of opinions will exist within their own memberships, as well as within target potential green voters. Two issues, in particular, were raised in survey responses that highlight the need for UK Green Parties to manage a divergence of views within their own memberships. These two issues were: whether local parties wishing to stand down in the recent election should have been able to deviate from the chosen political strategy of fielding candidates in as many seats as possible; and the expression of differing views on sex and gender identity. Handling dissent is a topic which is explored further in the next section.

Section Three: To what extent should Green Parties model the society they wish to see?

Concerns around internal governance coalesce around a belief that Green Parties are offering a genuinely alternative vision of a society that is more democratic, more collaborative and based on a principle of subsidiarity (local power rather than central control). Some respondents expressed the importance of Green Parties practising what they preach and getting their own houses in order. This took several forms, including ensuring that members feel welcome and able to fully participate, and that their generosity (with both time and financial resources) is not abused:

"I felt hugely pressurised to donate or self-fund even when it was putting me into debt. Not okay" – GPEW candidate

"it was surprising to see such a large majority, given the messaging to volunteers that we needed to carry on/stay out late as it was wafer thin" – GPEW member

"I've found the policy ratification process to be intimidating, dominated by a narrow slice of loud voices" – GPEW member

The issue of inclusivity and feeling comfortable within Green Parties in the UK was also mentioned in terms both of eliminating *"transphobia"* and accommodating those with gender-critical views. This tension also came up in responses in the context of UK Green Parties approach to dissent within their membership. In a party priding itself on a 'no whip' approach to MPs[12], dissent amongst the membership is, paradoxically, perceived to be increasingly tightly controlled.

In this regard, the disciplinary processes attracted significant comment and concern. Specifically, some respondents reflected on the disciplinary responses towards divergent views on sex and gender identity, and on promoting tactical voting to prevent a Tory win.

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[12]   Sian Berry applauded "the value of Green MPs able to vote with our conscience – and not under the pressure of the party whip" on social media platform, X, on 23rd July 2024. twitter.com/sianberry/status/1815821033774981422

Generally, the sense was that discipline is becoming too heavy-handed and potentially counterproductive:

> *"I happen to agree with the Party stance on Trans issues but I don't want to lose the membership of those who can't agree"* – GPEW member

> *"The disciplinary response was far too severe and disproportionate, going against our values of fairness and compassion"* – GPEW member

It was also noted that part of the attraction for new Green Party members is the way that it is governed differently:

> *"We will struggle to gain membership if our party seems the same top-down as others"* – GPEW member

As discussed in [Section One,](#) by far the most common priority raised by respondents was climate change, including related campaigning and calls for brave and honest public messaging.[13] However, a broad range of priorities were raised by respondents:

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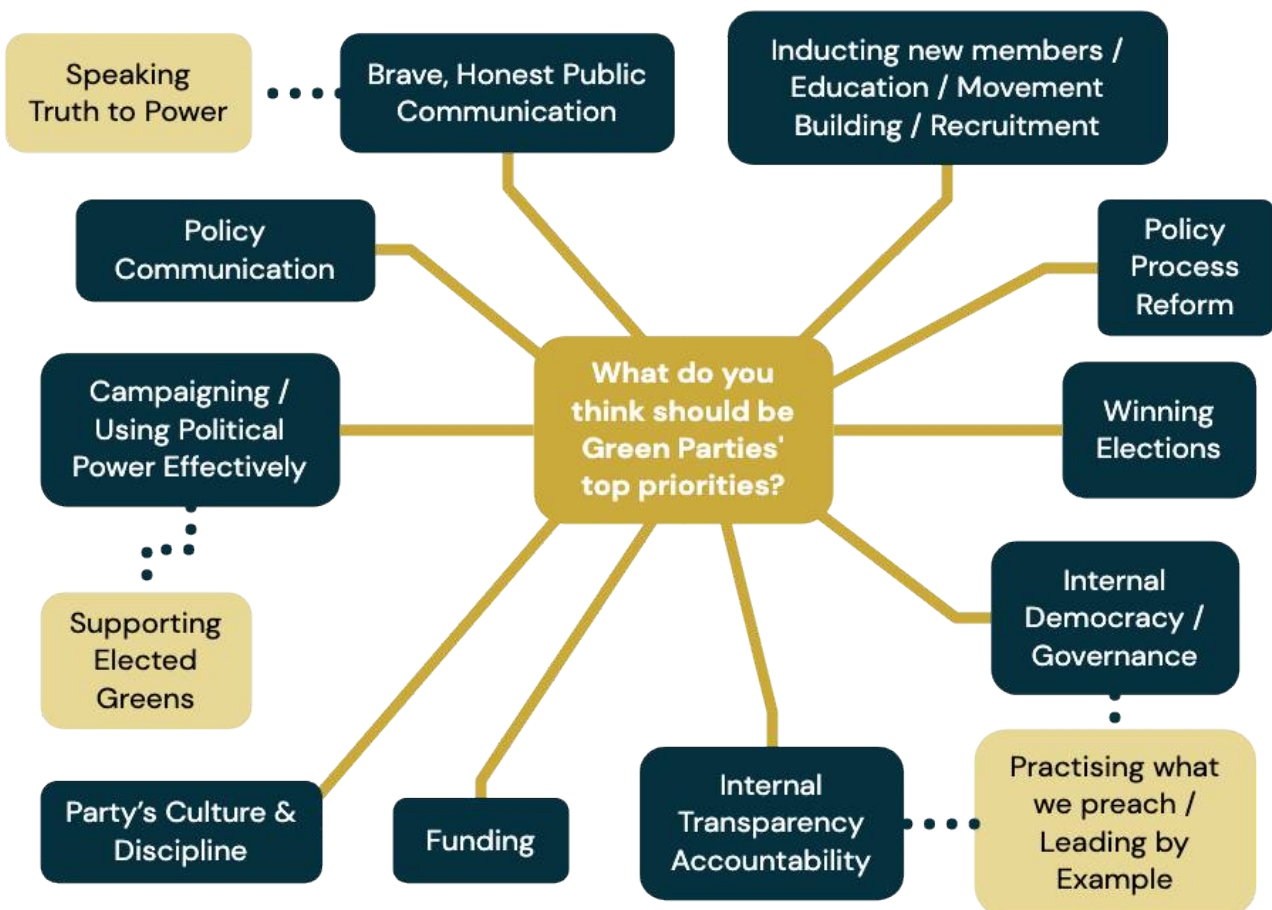
13   As Rupert Read has recently called for: [The true power of the Green Party is now: to admit our own powerlessness to 'save the world'](#)

Almost all these potential priorities were framed as needing additional focus or resource rather than just sustaining any current focus. However, there was no overwhelming consensus. After climate, responses tended to call for Green Parties to prioritise getting their houses in order. Reforms were called for in governance and in party culture, as well as in improving the quality and constructiveness of internal debate, improving policy processes, and trying to 'detoxify' the sex/gender debate. Although not a standout priority, the issue of "*transparency*" came up multiple times, mainly in relation to the disciplinary process but also more broadly in terms of party processes:

> *"All GPEW business should be accessible by members including all minutes of all committees"* – GPEW member

On the issue of subsidiarity and electoral strategy, GPEW has a core value which states:

> *'We emphasise democratic participation and accountability by ensuring that decisions are taken at the closest practical level to those affected by them.'* – GPEW Core Value 8

Notwithstanding that many were content that target to win was the correct strategy, there was also a sense that this has fostered a tension between the local and central direction of the party. This sense appears strongest amongst respondents furthest away from the target seats (notably the North of England and Wales). As well as the issue of control, concern was expressed that finances are being increasingly centralised, meaning that local parties have less money both directly, in terms of capitation money; and indirectly, by pressuring members to donate their money and their time to the target seat campaigns rather than their local party. The latter also, in some cases, led to a loss of deposits.

> *"the opportunity cost… is fewer second places and more deposits lost"* – GPEW councillor

Whilst all welcome the achievement of four MPs, the 2024 election has left some uneasy with a sense that power has shifted towards the centre:

> *"we're struggling a bit with balancing a perceived need to control and dictate from above so that seats are won, with our core values and philosophy of nothing about us without us"* – GPEW member

> *"A major tension is around Local Party autonomy – there were cases of local Parties trying to stand down candidates unilaterally, in conflict with the agreed strategy. There is a balancing act between ensuring consistency and avoiding over-centralisation which we are still navigating"* – GPEW Executive officer

The four constituencies targeted by GPEW and the candidates selected also created concern in terms of who was represented (Southern England; white, middle-class):

> *"resentment and anger expressed by many in the North West Region that no constituency north of the line from the Wash to the Severn was selected for targeting… the damage to morale and cohesion was real"* – GPEW member

"I think there was a lack of inclusion, diversity and partnership in the approach. I get that resources are limited, but there are some contested seats we might have responded to with a bit more agility and cooperation. We might also have pushed candidates who don't fit the white middle-class stereotype so much" – GPEW member

Whilst some argue that the policy of standing candidates everywhere was democratically chosen at Autumn Conference 2023, others argue that exceptional cases of standing down should have been permitted, if that was the local party's decision. The argument is that a more nuanced approach to this issue might be more appropriate:

"co-operative working feels at the heart of our ethos as a party and might have won us a stronger platform" – GPEW member

There was also some concern expressed about the selection of Sian Berry as parliamentary candidate for Brighton, on the basis that Green Parties should field *"local candidates for local parties"* – GPEW member.

There is an expectation amongst survey respondents that target seats for the next General Election will not only be more numerous but also more widely spread across the country. Based on the dissatisfaction in some regions, there are calls for the target selection process to be more transparent and democratic and for a greater diversity of (local) candidates, not only to reflect party values but also to attract and maintain a broad support base for transformative change.

Based on the responses to this survey overall – and accepting the caveat that unconcerned members may be less motivated to respond – there appears to be an issue of trust within Green Parties. If Green Parties are to embrace 'doing politics differently', and continue drawing on the voluntary time and contributions of their memberships to build capacity, then faith in organisation processes are critical. The green movement, and Green Parties in particular, face the rapidly increasing severity of the ecological and climate emergency. They do this in a political environment that barely acknowledges the broader predicament of which climate change is a symptom or the scale and reach of a sufficient policy response. The day-to-day political context differs in Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, but the gulf is vast across the UK between the immediate concerns of citizens and what is required to take responsibility for our society's overall direction of travel.

In this context, Green House Think Tank hopes that this analysis might prompt further discussion around these issues and wider reflections on the role, priorities and strategic approaches that UK Green Parties might choose to take.

Green House 2024 general election survey highlights big questions for UK Green Parties around their purpose and differentiation from other political parties, how to bring the general public on board, how to represent increasingly diverse views and how to model the society they wish to see through their own internal governance.

Green House is a think tank founded in 2011. It aims to lead the development of green thinking in the UK. Green House produces reports and briefings on different subjects. We do not have a party line, but rather aim to stimulate debate and discussion. Politics, they say, is the art of the possible. But the possible is not fixed. What we believe is possible depends on our knowledge and beliefs about the world. Ideas can change the world, and Green House is about challenging the ideas that have created the world we live in now and offering positive alternatives.