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To leaflet or not to leaflet? The question of election leafleting in Sunderland Central.

Professor Angela Smith and Dr Michael Pearce. University of Sunderland UK.

Leaflets are easily available and widely accessible, yet their centrality to the election process is often overlooked.

Sunderland returns two members of parliament. The current seats were formed by the 2010 reorganisation of parliamentary constituencies. The city has returned only Labour MPs since 1964. Sunderland is regularly first to complete its general election count after the polls close. It was also the first to declare its EU referendum result, and although the “leave” majority was by no means the largest in the UK, rapid reporting gave Sunderland prominence, helping it to earning it the media accolade of “Brexit City”.

In 2024, a new Labour candidate for Sunderland Central was announced following the retirement of Julie Elliott, who had held the seat since 2010. Lewis Atkinson had been a local activist but was not widely known outside the constituency party. How has Atkinson been “marketed” and how have the other parties faced the challenge of leafleting in the face of almost certain defeat?

Only Labour sent out leaflets that profiled the candidate. In the neighbouring constituency of Houghton and Sunderland South, the incumbent candidate was well-known and constituents received a “letter” from Sir Keir Starmer with a generic message of support for the candidate.

Probably designed to introduce Atkinson to the wider populus, the trifold Sunderland Central leaflet also contained a “letter”, but this was from Atkinson, using a font resembling handwriting to imply authenticity and sincerity. The text begins with a statement of love for the city and its people, followed by a declaration of humility – “it is the honour of my life to be the Labour candidate”. Collective pronouns produce a sense of community: “this government has failed us”; “we need change”. A shift to exclusive pronouns relates to the party: “we have a plan”. The text finishes with direct address to the reader: “I am asking you to vote Labour”.

There is then testimony from a minor celebrity who lives in the constituency – a well-known former local newspaper journalist. Finally, the third fold offers main Labour policies: one relating to the NHS gives Atkinson the opportunity to reference his credentials (“I worked in the local NHS for 19 years”); then a more generic list of optimistic policies.

The leaflet is illustrated with photos of Atkinson in clearly-identifiable Sunderland Central locations, ensuring his identity is linked with that of the constituency, framed in the party colour, with the Union Jack cutting across the leaflet corners.

The only other party to distribute a leaflet in Sunderland Central was Reform. This was highly generic, with a white box at the top containing the candidate's name: Chris Enyon. The leaflet was dominated on one side with photos of party leader Nigel Farage and party chair, Richard Tice, both looking optimistically upwards towards the candidate's name, with Tice appearing to point towards it. There was no further information about the candidate or the constituency, but highlighted policies relating to immigration. This leaflet is dominantly blue with a faint Union Jack emblem across the whole page, showing a clear link with Conservative semiotic properties.

For more tailored material about the Reform candidate, voters need to consult the party's website. Like Atkinson, Enyon emphasises his local links, but also writes "I am not a career politician parachuted into Sunderland". The other four candidates are Sunderland residents, so where is this implied contrast directed? Is it meant to sow seeds of doubt as to their local credentials? Like Atkinson, there is a collective cause in the use of pronouns: "Sunderland's best days could well be ahead of us if we are willing to push". The links with Reform's policies are personalised to Sunderland – tax thresholds are lifted for "Sunderland workers"; creating jobs "in Sunderland". The mantra of "zero immigration" that appears on the generic Reform leaflet is repeated, referring to "our borders", but then a shift to the exclusive pronoun in "our fully costed plan".

Thus Reform and Labour used the same strategies to create a sense of community through collective pronouns, local messages, Union flags, but Reform also shows a clear link with the Conservatives through the use of colour.

The curious fact of there being only two party leaflets distributed across both constituencies might indicate that the other parties were relying on online representation. The web profile of the Conservative Westminster candidate for Sunderland Central, Gregory Peacock, has not been updated since 2021 and shows him only in his current role, ending with local knowledge that "will make me a strong and competent councillor".

The two main parties – Labour and Conservatives – are taking very different approaches, with Labour keen to champion a new candidate in Sunderland Central, but less enthusiastic about promoting the well-known incumbent in Houghton and Sunderland South. The Conservatives, on the other hand, are hardly bothering to contest the seat, with a candidate who appears in name only. The gap in this election would seem to be filled by Reform, perhaps opportunistically harking back to the "Brexit City" accolade.