

Bexley



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Since 2022

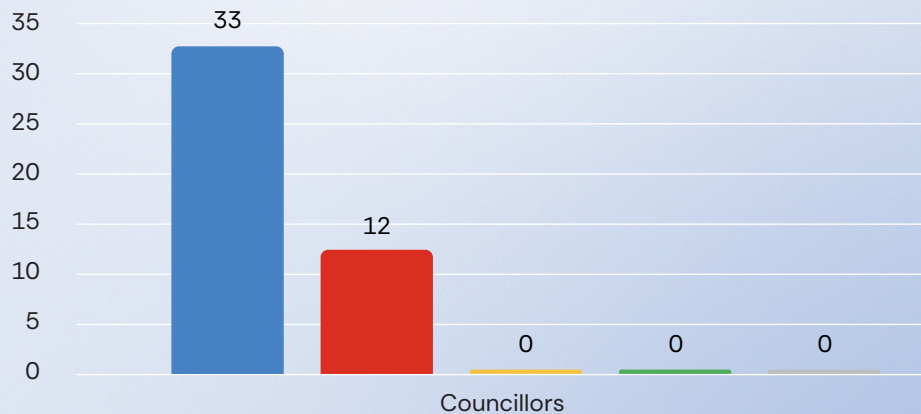
Conservative Defence

Interviewed in November, just before stepping down after 17 years as Bexley’s leader, Teresa O’Neill expressed confidence that local voters recognised how well Conservatives have run their borough for two decades and would accordingly keep voting for her party. But when Nigel Farage boasted soon after that Reform UK “will win boroughs in London” everyone knew Bexley was on his list. It could hardly be riper for conquest.

In 2022, Bexley Tories withstood the second largest Conservative-to-Labour swing in London (after Barnet) to secure their party’s biggest London vote share and lose only one seat, winning 33 to Labour’s 12. Even though three of those Tories now sit as Independents, the council superficially looks solidly theirs.

But in 2014 Farage’s UKIP took more than 20 per cent of the borough’s popular vote and won three seats. Even the British National Party nudged into double figures in some wards. In the 2016 EU Referendum, Bexley was one of London’s five Leave-voting boroughs. And in the 2024 general election, Reform made ominous impacts in the three local parliamentary seats.

Bexley Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 45



Conservative Labour Liberal Democrat Green Other

By-elections since May 2022

17 OCTOBER 2024

BELVEDERE

LAB HOLD

Labour’s vote too is susceptible to Reform: the sole Bexley by-election since 2022 resulted in a Labour hold but with a sharply reduced share as Reform’s rose by even more and that of the Tories barely changed. Conservatives have been worrying about a Reform challenge in Bexley since even before Farage made a comeback as its leader. They must be very worried now.

Local landscape

With its high rate of home-ownership, a population whose average age is closer to England's than to London's, its history of giving houseroom to the nationalist Right and its long border with Reform-run Kent, Bexley looks a natural next stage of Reform's advance in the south east of England.

Geographically, Tory strength is concentrated in the centre and south, the parts furthest from its Thames waterfront and areas becoming settled by young and liberal-minded professionals. They are drawn by relatively low London house prices and the Abbey Wood spur of the Elizabeth line, through which Bexley's boundary with Greenwich literally runs. There, Labour has its redoubt. All points below that red band are solid blue.

In 2022, Labour got a very small reward for taking 41 per cent of the popular vote with a high-ish swing. That was because the party polled a steady 30-40 per cent across a lot of wards while the Conservatives got around 50 per cent. It was more fortunate in the 2024 general election, when Labour's Dan Francis surprisingly gained the Bexleyheath & Crayford parliamentary seat. Such luck is unlikely to be repeated on 7 May.

Bexley has a strong sense of borough autonomy and, much like Bromley, its bigger Tory neighbour, has form for seeking to thwart the will of Londonwide government, notably when it comes to roads. It was the principal borough opponent of Ken Livingstone's unrealised plan for a Thames Gateway road bridge, even though it would have linked Newham to the north with Greenwich to Bexley's immediate west, rather than with Bexley directly. The objection was to the risk of more through-traffic and congestion.

Much more recently, Bexley was among the four Conservative boroughs – the others were Bromley, Hillingdon and Harrow – which, along with Surrey County Council, sought without success to thwart through the courts Sir Sadiq Khan's expansion of the Ultra-Low Emission Zone to all of Greater London. Bexley has stuck to its line that the expansion wasn't really about air quality at all.

The Tories have had no truck either with traffic-reduction policies such as the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods. Despite now being served by a Superloop bus service, Bexley

is not abundant in public transport. When it comes to motorists, the borough tends to look after its own.

O'Neill took pride in her administration's careful housekeeping, helping it to limit Council Tax increases and ultimately avoid becoming one of the string of boroughs that has received extra help with its finances from national government. Tree-planting, recycling, new libraries and children's services rated "outstanding" by Ofsted were among the policy achievements she most prized.

The borough has been criticised by opponents for dragging its feet on homebuilding, especially the cheaper kinds. Its housing strategy signals caution and conservation, protesting readiness to help London "grow sustainably" while continuing to "respect the borough's overall character and identity".

There have been two significant estate regeneration projects and Bexley has backed the renewal of the huge postwar Thamesmead estate, part of which lies in its territory. That includes an extension of the Docklands

Local landscape

Light Railway south of the Thames beyond the recently-approved one into next-door Greenwich, which would take the line to Belvedere. At the same time, City Hall has lately overruled Bexley’s objections to a tall residential tower near Abbey Wood.

O’Neill will stand down as a councillor this time and concentrate solely on her work in the House of Lords, to which she was elevated in November 2022. Her successor as Bexley leader, David Leaf, has to win a big battle if Bexley is to stay in Conservative hands. Nationalist Right leanings have endured in this 72 per cent white borough and can be traced back to a notorious BNP bookshop in Welling that opened in 1989 and was a beacon for racist unrest until its closure by the council in 1995.

What would a Reform administration bring to Bexley Council that isn’t already being supplied? It is parsimonious to a fault, competent, takes care of its roads and appears to run good services. The Civic Halls in Bexleyheath at the borough’s heart have been blessed with many years of consistency, nurtured by a personal touch. Leaf has shown no inclination to dismantle the machine O’Neill built.

Reform’s Bexley leader, Tom Bright, has been applauding Reform flagship Kent County Council’s “balanced budget” – complete with a Council Tax rise of 3.99 per cent they’d promised wouldn’t happen – cheering on high-profile defectors from the Tories and chiming in with

Farage’s “lawless London” narrative. His programme for improving Bexley’s local government is less discernible. Maybe the incoming Reform tide will be so strong that this won’t matter.

Bexley Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	30	32	1	-	-	-
2006	54	9	-	-	-	-
2010	52	11	-	-	-	-
2014	45	15	-	3	-	-
2018	34	11	-	-	-	-
2022	33	12	-	-	-	-

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Electoral prospects

Broadly, Bexley gets more affluent the further you travel from north to south, and this is reflected in electoral behaviour. There is a knot of Labour wards in the north along the Thames, then some marginal territory and then safe Conservative wards.

Erith

10 seats

These four wards along the borough's Thames shore are Bexley's most Labour area. They are different from the rest of the borough in their class and ethnic composition – the only wards in Bexley where white British Londoners are in the minority, although they are the largest single community and the proportion is still much higher than is found in most of inner London and several affluent suburbs.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Belvedere	Lab	Lab	Lab	31.4	54.1	-	14.5	-
Erith	Lab	Lab	x	30.9	69.1	-	-	-
Slade Green & Northend	Lab	Lab	x	37.6	62.4	-	-	-
Thamesmead East	Lab	Lab	Lab	22.2	69.6	8.2	-	-

The principal minority is black African, as it is in much of south east London. Slade Green, Thamesmead and Erith have high proportions of social housing. All but Slade Green & Northend ward are in Labour's fairly safe Erith & Thamesmead parliamentary constituency.

Reform poses a threat to Labour's position in these wards, with the possible exception of Thamesmead East. Erith is quite a traditional working-class area like those in Kent which went massively for Reform in 2025.

There is a persistent Conservative vote, over 30 per cent in 2022, which may well collapse to Reform. Turnout is also habitually low and the wards are not vigorously contested, which means there is a pool of low-engagement voters of the sort who can be mobilised by Reform. The party won 17 per cent in the Belvedere by-election, which came before their big surge in 2025, and UKIP at its 2014 peak polled 29 per cent in predecessor wards Belvedere, Erith and Lesnes Abbey.

Bexleyheath

13 seats

Demographically, the mix of 80 per cent owner occupied, 70 per cent white British and only around 30 per cent with degree-level qualifications has been a recipe for Conservatism even if, or perhaps especially if, these suburbs are less plush than those to the south in Sidcup or Bromley.

Labour's vote share in 2022 was respectable, considering, although it was boosted by the two-party nature of the contest. Northumberland Heath is closer to Labour's Erith redoubt and in demographic terms between the two poles, so its voting pattern – a split result in 2018 and Labour's sole Bexley gain in 2022 – is not surprising.

The same demographics that have made Conservative Bexleyheath resistant to Labour make it extremely vulnerable to Reform. UKIP polled around 30 per cent there in 2014 and elected single councillors in two wards. It would not be surprising if Reform swept the board here.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Barnehurst	Con	Con	x	58.7	41.3	-	-	-
Bexleyheath	Con	Con	Con	52.0	37.6	10.5	-	-
Crook Log	Con	Con	Con	50.4	35.3	14.3	-	-
Northumberland Heath	Lab	Lab	x	41.8	49.2	9.0	-	-
West Heath	Con	Con	Con	58.0	42.0	-	-	-

Crayford

3 seats

Crayford stands a little geographically apart from the built-up area of Bexleyheath but it has a seamless border with Dartford to the east.

It used to be a reasonably reliable Labour ward but swung to the Right in 2006 and did not quite come back in 2022. It must be a probable for Reform. UKIP did not contest it in 2014, but 17 per cent voted BNP in that year.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Crayford	Con	Con	Con	53.7	46.3	-	-	-

Welling

6 seats

The Welling area is in the Old Bexley & Sidcup parliamentary seat but it is north of the A2, unlike most of the constituency. Labour has sometimes been able to win the East Wickham ward but not for the past few elections. They fell 41 votes short of a seat in 2022.

The BNP history here, mentioned above, has been reflected at the ballot box. In 2009 the extreme Right party finished eight votes short of winning an East Wickham seat in a local by-election. They were still polling nine per cent in 2014, alongside a UKIP share of 29 per cent. Welling is changing, in that the white British proportion of the population fell by 16 percentage points in 2011-21 and is now only 62 per cent, which is low for Bexley.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
East Wickham	Con	Con	Con	43.9	38.1	12.0	-	6.0
Falconwood & Welling	Con	Con	Con	47.0	33.8	-	13.2	6.0

Sidcup

13 seats

This group of wards is in the southern part of Bexley, the suburban area lying between the A2 and A20 arterial roads that link London and Kent. Most of it would identify as Sidcup, although St Mary's & St James ward is Old Bexley.

The Sidcup ward is actually the least typical, in that it is only 64 per cent owner-occupied while the other wards are around 80 per cent, but there is not much variety in voting behaviour. Even at Labour's 2002 peak, when they won control of the council by a single seat, they only had two councillors from this group of wards.

Sidcup's affluent residents tend to be managers and tradespeople rather than professionals. As with Bexleyheath, the social make-up suggests strong Reform potential.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Blackfen & Lamorbey	Con	Con	Con	49.1	30.8	12.6	-	7.6
Blendon & Penhill	Con	Con	Con	53.4	29.7	10.2	-	6.6
Longlands	Con	Con	x	51.0	36.6	12.4	-	-
St Mary's & St James	Con	Con	x	51.9	30.6	11.3	-	6.2
Sidcup	Con	Con	Con	47.9	30.7	12.0	-	9.5



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What to watch for

Bexley is, or should be, Reform's number one target in London. The party will confound expectations should it fail to take it.