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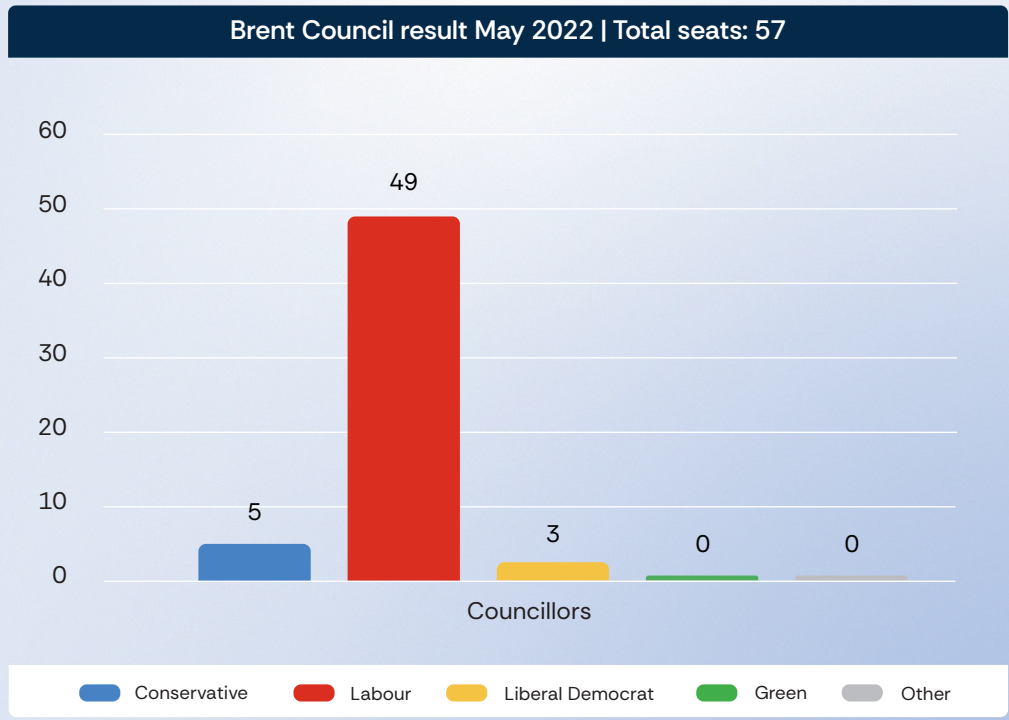
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Since 2022

Labour Defence

Brent was one of the eight boroughs where Labour lost ground to the Conservatives in 2022. The three per cent swing was nowhere near big enough to prevent Labour winning 49 of the 57 council seats, but it helped the Tories take five – more than they had won in 2018 when, pre-boundary changes, there had been 63 seats to contest. The Liberal Democrats, too, improved their position with a three-seat haul. This fraying of the Labour fabric could well become bigger and broader.



By-elections since May 2022

04 JULY 2024	QUEENS PARK	LAB HOLD
18 FEBRUARY 2025	ALPERTON	LIB DEM HOLD

There have been two by-elections in Brent in the past four years. The first, held on general election day 2024, resulted in a diminished Labour hold. The second, which took place last February, provided qualified clues about what might happen this May: a solid Lib Dem hold, a big Labour loss of vote share and the Conservatives, though third, improving since 2022 and comfortably ahead of Reform UK.

The Tories will hope to build on their strengths in the borough. The Lib Dems will surely want to be seen as the natural alternative for local voters fed up with Labour, as they have been in Brent in the past.

Labour has lost eight of its 2022 councillor intake including, in December, five to the Greens, four of whom had been deselected by their now former party. Labour had already lost one of its group members to the Tories – also following deselection – and another who has been an Independent since June when she was placed under “administration suspension” from the party. The eighth to go left in March to become the first and, so far, only London councillor to sit as a member of Your Party. He isn’t seeking re-election. The extent to which these changes of allegiance reflect Brent public opinion will be revealed soon enough.

Local landscape

Brent stretches from the topmost tips of Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea in the south to a long border with Harrow in the north and offers all the variety that contrast might suggest. Within its border lie Wembley Stadium, Neasden's celebrated Swaminarayan Hindu temple, Willesden, Harlesden, parts of Kilburn, Queen's Park, the Park Royal commercial estate and the Welsh Harp reservoir.

As with other "middle London" boroughs, Brent, which takes its name from the river of that name, doesn't lend itself to easy definition, being both urban and suburban and with some of its settlements and features straddling borough boundaries.

Brent provides its own version of London's complexity and diversity. Its 2026 election results will do the same. It is a radial slice of inner north west London, a complex and sometimes chaotic metropolitan mixture of ethnic, religious, social and local communities chopped up – but also united – by railways and major roads.

The current council has made housebuilding a big priority, and not without reason. The last Census showed that an above London average rise in population – up by 9.2 per cent to nearly 340,000 – had been accompanied by falls in the percentages of home owners and social renters while private renting had gone up.

To address that recipe for homelessness and insecurity, the council has energetically pursued homebuilding programmes in partnership with the Mayor of London and others, as well as investing its own money. In May 2023, Sir Sadiq Khan visited a new development in Stonebridge to highlight his contribution to council home building in the capital.

Brent has also made headlines for its decision last year to twin with the occupied West Bank city of Nablus. Butt explained that this did not represent "support for any political group or administration" there but instead reflected "Brent's humanitarian values and a desire to connect with ordinary people in another part of the

world". He also assured residents that acknowledged the "pain and trauma" experienced by Jews following "the horrific terrorist attacks committed by Hamas", but the move was controversial with some.

Brent's ethnicity breakdown at the last Census showed Londoners describing themselves as black to account for 17.5 per cent and those identifying as Asian and as white at around a third each. This mix contains the highest proportion of Irish people of any local authority in Great Britain and the largest number of Brazilians, along with Romanians, Poles and Somalis. In terms of religion, Christians formed a plurality at around 38 per cent, followed by Muslims (21 per cent and rising) and Hindus (15.6 per cent and falling).

Historically, political control of Brent has mostly fluctuated between Labour and No Overall Control, with the Conservatives providing a hung council leader from 1990 until 1996 and a Lib Dem taking the same role from 2006 until 2010. That year marked the start of a

Local landscape

sustained period of Labour stewardship, for all but the first two years under Muhammed Butt.

The likely erosion of Labour support this time may take different forms in different parts of the borough. The Conservative pick-up in 2022 probably owed much to the solidifying of Hindu Londoners’ support for the party, part of a well-established national trend. The Tories’ seats are all in the north of the borough, where it holds hands with Tory Harrow. They will hope to build from there.

The current Lib Dem seats are in the west. The party was delighted to hold one in Alperton ward in last February’s by-election, one of the two it won in the three-seat ward four years ago (Labour won the other). Their vote share was up. So was the Conservatives’. Labour’s wasn’t. The troubling backdrop to the contest is that it followed the resignation of the Lib Dem councillor who had represented Alperton since 2020, overhauling Labour in a previous by-election. He withdrew from electoral politics partly on police advice following the release of a man who had been jailed for stalking him.

The Tories finished well ahead of Reform in that by-election, confirming that this super-diverse borough is not natural Farage country. The Greens didn’t field a

candidate, but in May could provide the stiffest test of Labour in several wards. Green candidates were runners-up behind winning Labour slates in six of them last time. In every case they finished a long way behind, but vote

Brent Council elections since 2020						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	19	35	9	-	-	-
2006	15	21	27	-	-	-
2010	6	40	17	-	-	-
2014	6	56	1	-	-	-
2018	3	60	-	-	-	-
2022	5	49	3	-	-	-

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Electoral prospects

Labour faces challenges from a number of directions in Brent – the Conservatives in the north, the Lib Dems and Greens elsewhere. They might be victims of an effective pincer movement. But it is also possible that the other parties might fumble what seems like a golden opportunity.

The parliamentary boundary commissioners have struggled with Brent's geography and there have been major changes in the last two reviews. Here, we attempt to divide it up into local groupings that make some sense politically, socially and geographically.

Kilburn

8 seats

This area was formerly (2010-24) in the Hampstead & Kilburn constituency and adjoins Camden and Westminster. It was absurd even in 1888 for this built-up inner London area to be excluded from the London County Council's domain, a situation which was rectified in 1965.

The demographics of this corner are very middle-class metropolitan liberal, while the rest of the borough's main quality is its diversity. This is the whitest part of Brent – Brondesbury Park and Queens Park are the only wards with a white majority – and the most educated, as the same two wards are also over 50 per cent educated to degree level. Kilburn is more working-class thanks to a high proportion of social housing (41 per cent). Queens

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Brondesbury Park	Lab	Lab	x	24.5	50.9	8.9	15.7	-
Kilburn	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.5	57.7	10.1	19.3	3.5
Queens Park	Lab	Lab	Lab	11.5	54.5	14.8	19.1	-

Park is the most irreligious (33 per cent) corner of a borough whose population is particularly inclined to express one of several religions.

Politically, these wards have not been guaranteed for Labour. In 2018, Brondesbury Park was a Labour gain from the Conservatives, who had in turn gained it from the Lib Dems in 2014. In Labour's bad year, 2006, only

one Labour councillor was elected in this area, in Kilburn ward.

One possibility is that the Lib Dems and Greens trip over each other when targeting the seats. They have Lib Dem histories but are potentially fertile Green territories. The ex-Labour Green councillor in Brondesbury Park is fighting the seat again under her new colours.

Willesden

8 seats

Willesden and its surroundings is traditionally a diverse area, to the extent that “Other White” was its largest ethnic category in the 2021 Census, although it accounts for only around 25 per cent of the population.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Cricklewood & Mapesbury	Lab	Lab	x	14.1	52.9	12.0	14.7	6.3
Dollis Hill	Lab	Lab	Lab	15.1	58.7	14.9	11.3	-
Willesden Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	12.6	54.6	12.9	19.9	-

London as a world city, a city of immigration from everywhere, is nowhere more apparent than on the streets of Brent where the Home Office’s “Go Home” vans trundled in 2013. Of these three wards, Dollis Hill sticks out a bit as having the second-largest Muslim population (36 per cent) in Brent.

Like the wards to its south, the Willesden area returned a Lib Dem majority in 2006 but the Greens may now fancy their chances.

Harlesden

9 seats

Harlesden has one of London’s longer-established black communities, Caribbean at its core but now increasingly of African origin. There is some gentrification creeping in, particularly at its Kensal Green end.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Harlesden & Kensal Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.5	56.4	8.6	18.0	7.5
Roundwood	Lab	Lab	Lab	13.1	70.4	-	16.5	-
Stonebridge	Lab	Lab	Lab	14.3	70.2	-	15.5	-

Stonebridge has a history of deprivation and the tenth highest proportion of social housing (56 per cent) of any London ward. Despite containing Britain’s largest Hindu temple, it is one of the least Hindu wards in Brent (five per cent).

The three predecessor wards stuck with Labour in 2006 and while the Greens have some potential in Harlesden & Kensal Green it is hard to see a viable challenge to Labour.

West Wembley and Sudbury

8 seats

This is the area to the west of the main line out of Euston as it goes through Wembley, adjoining the borough boundary with Ealing. Politically, it is notable in being the original base of the Liberals and their successor the Lib Dems in Brent.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Alperton	LD	Lab	LD	12.7	42.3	45.0	-	-
Sudbury	LD	Lab	x	11.2	45.0	43.8	-	-
Wembley Central	Lab	Lab	Lab	22.8	60.3	17.0	-	-

The other factor in these wards is social. Wembley Central and Alperton are the two most Hindu wards in London and Sudbury is in the top ten. The Hindu vote in general swung to the Tories in the borough elections of 2022 and in the general election of 2024, but in Brent it was mainly in the better-off wards to the north of the

borough, rather than these more deprived areas with – at the Alperton end – a background of manufacturing industry. The Lib Dems have the established local presence but it is possible to see the Tory vote increasing in 2026, as it did in the February 2025 Alperton by-election.

East Wembley

7 seats

This area – broadly Wembley between Wembley Central and Wembley Park, including the stadium and complex – has seen a lot of recent development concentrated in what is now Wembley Park ward (a new creation in 2022). Wembley Hill and Tokyngton are areas of plurality (43 per cent) South Asian ethnicity, mostly Indian, although split nearly evenly between Hindus and Muslims.

Wembley Park is effectively a new high-rise community, young, educated and hyper-diverse. It has the highest rate of private renting (62 per cent) and of flat dwelling

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Tokyngton	Lab	Lab	x	24.0	57.7	6.0	12.4	-
Wembley Hill	Lab	Lab	Lab	38.2	45.6	7.7	8.5	-
Wembley Park	Lab	Lab	x	19.7	63.2	17.1	-	-

(99 per cent) of any ward in London. Neighbourhoods like this that have seen high population growth (such as Newham’s Stratford Olympic Park and Croydon’s Fairfield) seem to have an affinity with the Greens. The party’s campaign here will be helped by having an ex-Labour councillor in place and defending the seat.

The boundary changes in this area in 2022 were radical, so comparisons with the past are difficult. But the Conservatives did well in Wembley Hill despite unpromising demographics and a bad national climate. Whether that was an exceptional campaign or whether battle can be renewed in 2026 is as yet unclear.

North Wembley

10 seats

Three of the four wards form Brent’s border with Harrow. The other, Preston, is part of the same suburban block that sprawls between several railway lines – Lioness, Metropolitan and Jubilee. The three Harrow border wards are all majority owner-occupied, the Metro-land of family houses with gardens that was a 1930s suburban ideal and is still attractive to people of all ethnicities.

Like Harrow, these wards are home to many affluent Hindu families (Kenton and Queensbury 30 per cent Hindu, the other wards a little less). For a while, Labour’s gains at national and local level had seemed inexorable. But the Tories made a slight comeback in 2022, gaining a couple of seats in Queensbury in an echo of what happened in the adjoining Harrow wards.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Kenton	Con	Con	Con	48.2	36.6	6.6	8.5	-
Northwick Park	Lab	Lab	x	34.6	56.5	8.9	-	-
Preston	Lab	Lab	x	31.4	52.9	4.9	6.9	4.0
Queensbury	Con	Con	Lab	47.0	43.5	6.6	-	2.9

Brent West, despite the canny attention to local detail and community interests that has kept Barry Gardiner representing this area for Labour in parliament since he gained it on a huge swing in 1997, swung towards the Tories in 2024. The Conservatives will be looking to

establish themselves as a serious presence on Brent Council for the first time since 2010, and these wards will be key to that effort.

North East Brent

7 seats

This area is north east of Wembley, including part of the border with Barnet and suburban areas around Fryent Country Park. It is hyper-diverse rather than part of the Hindu suburban block.

It was still capable of sustaining a significant Tory minority in the 2022 elections, which might give them some hope for this time.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Barnhill	Lab	Lab	x	30.7	57.3	-	12.0	-
Kingsbury	Lab	Lab	x	29.1	53.6	7.5	9.8	-
Welsh Harp	Lab	Lab	Lab	24.9	51.2	9.6	11.7	2.7



BRENT

What to watch for

Will the Tories be undermined by vote losses to Reform? Will the Lib Dems, Greens and others divide the metropolitan progressive vote, letting Labour through? No other party stands a chance of forming a majority in this complex borough. If it doesn't, piecing together an alternative administration in a hung council situation could prove difficult.