

Camden

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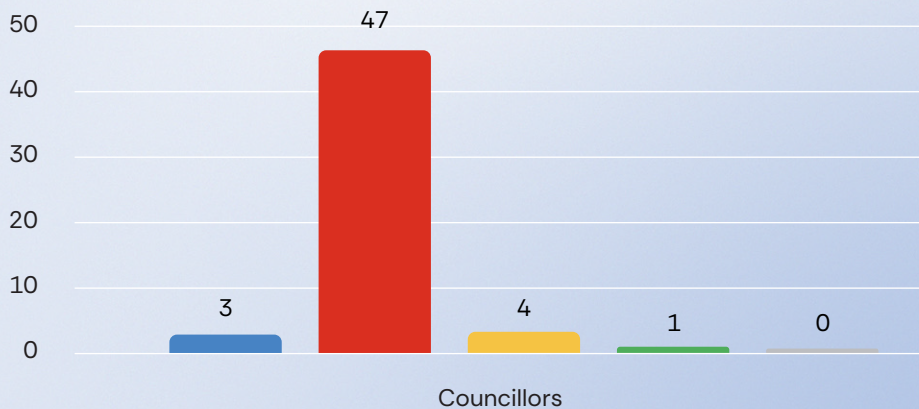
Since 2022

Labour Defence

There have been eight by-elections in Camden since Labour amassed the latest in its succession of big majorities four years ago. Each has been revealing in its own way, but the most recent was spectacularly so. It wasn't a surprise that the Liberal Democrats captured a seat in West Hampstead ward from Labour last summer, but the size of their victory despite Labour making a determined defence showed the potential for a major shift in the political composition of the Town Hall. It also showed how that shift might turn out to be limited.

Camden is a good example of how a flight from Labour in two different directions could, paradoxically, help Labour survive, for the Greens, too, will be fishing in the pool of disillusion. They were squeezed in that West Hampstead contest, but in November 2023 executed a signature hold of the single seat they won in 2022 after Siân Berry, at that time London's best-known Green, vacated it to concentrate on winning a parliamentary seat in Brighton.

Camden Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 55



Conservative Labour Liberal Democrat Green Other

By-elections since May 2022

07 JULY 2022	HAMPSTEAD TOWN	LD GAIN FROM LAB
01 JUNE 2023	SOUTH HAMPSTEAD	LAB HOLD
30 NOVEMBER 2023	HIGHGATE	GREEN HOLD
02 MAY 2024	FROGNAL	CON HOLD
05 SEPTEMBER 2024	CAMDEN SQUARE	LAB HOLD
05 SEPTEMBER 2024	KENTISH TOWN SOUTH	LAB HOLD
05 SEPTEMBER 2024	KILBURN	LAB HOLD
08 AUGUST 2025	WEST HAMPSTEAD	LD GAIN FROM LAB (CON)

Despite the high number of mid-term contests, Labour's overall position on the council has not been much reduced. The party won 47 of Camden's 55 seats last time, compared to the Lib Dems' four, the Conservatives' three and the Greens' one. It still holds 45 and there have been no defections (or from any of the other parties). The Tories will hope to improve a bit, but seem unlikely to threaten much, just as Reform seems unlikely to menace them in these parts. A key dynamic will be ward-level splits between Green and Lib Dem support and whether Labour's is resilient enough against that backdrop for its candidates to hold on to besieged seats.

Local landscape

London contrasts don't come much sharper than those in Camden. It contains part of the West End and has some of the highest property prices in London. Yet it also has a poverty rate of 42 per cent, the capital's joint highest. It is home to London's Knowledge Quarter, a cluster of historic universities and cutting-edge life science research and global tech firms, but it is one of the boroughs that has seen its younger population fall a lot in recent years, leading to primary school mergers and closures as demand for places has fallen.

Camden contains three of London's major railway stations – King's Cross, Euston and St Pancras – as well as the British Library. Yet many of its residents, including some living within a stone's throw of those places, lead lives limited by a matrix of disadvantage, poor health and inequality. A fifth of Camden's areas are among England's 20 per cent most deprived.

The borough's contrasts are geographical too, taking in the timeless Hampstead Heath (owned and managed by the City of London), the huge and widely-praised King's Cross regeneration scheme, several historic parks, including Regent's, the British Museum, and the damaging unfinished business of the HS2 route and station, which

the council wants to lead to completion. At its southern end, it touches the Square Mile.

In policy terms, an administration led since 2024 by Richard Olszewski, who succeeded the House of Common-bound Georgia Gould, has been keen on greening, consolidating and developing traffic-reduction measures from Red Lion Square to Tottenham Court Road.

Growing challenges include a rise in the borough's older population. This forms part of a Londonwide trend, which inner boroughs such as Camden have lately joined – perhaps in part because neighbourhood improvements have made staying put more appealing to those with options than joining the drift to the suburbs and beyond.

The Care Quality Commission assessed the council's adult social provision as "outstanding" last year. Its children's social care has been similarly praised by Ofsted. The Social Housing Regulator has been less impressed by the borough's performance on fire safety, though Camden is far from alone in being rebuked over housing services.

Labour has dominated Camden Town Hall politics for almost all of the borough's history. Could other parties make a better job of capitalising on the strengths and dealing with its difficulties? Will Camden's voters give them the chance?

The Lib Dems seem set to advance further. The Greens will have high hopes in certain wards, but are standing no candidates in two, apparently giving way to those of the Camden People's Alliance, which describes itself as arising from the 2024 general election campaign of Independent candidate Andrew Feinstein. He finished second in Sir Keir Starmer's constituency with 19 per cent of the vote.

Camden Conservatives, so liberal they put out a leaflet in 2022 celebrating the fall of Boris Johnson, might benefit from the centre-Left vote splitting. On the other hand, Labour councillors are well dug-in and as councils go – these things are relative – Camden is well-regarded.

Local landscape

Labour has won all but two elections since Camden was created: the Conservatives prevailed at their historic high point of 1968, and in 2006 the Lib Dems formed the largest party group.

Labour's other by-election loss since 2022, also to the Lib Dems, came in the very first by-election of the term, demonstrating local Lib Dems' latent strength.

Camden Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	11	35	8	-	-	-
2006	14	18	20	-	2	-
2010	10	30	13	-	1	-
2014	12	40	1	-	1	-
2018	7	43	3	-	1	-
2022	3	47	4	-	1	-

 CAMDEN

Electoral prospects

Camden is a multi-faceted borough where Labour usually manages both to get a majority from its solid wards and add some representation from others that are more marginal. May 2022 produced a peak result for the party – it even got a toehold in Hampstead Town – but it is sure to suffer losses this time round, adding to the two already incurred in by-elections. It's all about how many.

There is local intelligence that the Green and Lib Dem campaign teams are sticking to their respective strongest areas, meaning voters are receiving only one message about who is best placed to be Labour rather finding themselves having to choose between two.

West Hampstead

12 seats

These wards lie between the borough border on the A5 (Kilburn High Road) and the A41 trunk road (Finchley Road). They are legitimately Hampstead, being part of the old Metropolitan borough, though nearly all are in NW6 with only small areas in NW8 and NW3.

Demographically, Kilburn is out of step with the other three in having a high proportion (42 per cent) of social housing and a relatively working-class population. The rest are among London's most highly-educated areas: two thirds of their residents have degrees and there is a large professional, private renting and public transport-using population.

Fortune Green and West Hampstead are the original centre of Camden Lib Dem activity. The party first won Fortune Green in 1986 and have had at least one councillor there ever since, most notably the redoubtable Flick Rea who represented it from the start until she

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Fortune Green	LD	Lab	Lab	12.2	45.5	42.3	-	-
Kilburn	Lab	Lab	Lab	17.6	68.2	14.2	-	-
South Hampstead	Lab	Lab	Lab	31.7	54.6	13.7	-	-
West Hampstead	Lab	Lab	Lab	16.4	46.1	37.5	-	-

handed over the reins to a Lib Dem colleague in a 2021 by-election.

Fortune Green has been Richard Olszewski's ward since 2014, although this time he is contesting the safer harbour of Holborn & Covent Garden. The Lib Dems resoundingly re-established their presence in West Hampstead in August last year. They must fancy their chances of getting six out of six in 2026.

South Hampstead, though, has remained a Labour versus Conservative contest. Labour held a seat here, though not very gloriously, in a 2023 by-election. Kilburn went Lib Dem in their peak year of 2006, but it looks a tough nut to crack for them or the Greens (who did not contest any of these promising seats in 2022).

Hampstead

10 seats

Hampstead largely deserves its reputation as an enclave of affluent liberal-Left intellectuals, but its council representation is politically variegated and likely to remain so. These wards can vote Conservative in the right circumstances – the party polled 42 per cent of the vote in Hampstead & Kilburn in the 2015 general election – but the party as it was under Boris Johnson in 2022 and under Kemi Badenoch now is not the sort that appeals here.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Belsize	LD	LD	LD	33.6	21.5	44.9	-	-
Frognal	Con	Con	x	47.5	24.7	13.4	14.5	-
Gospel Oak	Lab	Lab	Lab	15.7	66.0	15.2	-	3.1
Hampstead Town	Con	Lab	x	39.4	39.9	20.8	-	-

Camden Conservatives have been reduced to a single stronghold, wealthy Frognal, which should ensure the continuing presence of Tories in the council chamber. The Lib Dems have consolidated in Belsize and also seem likely to win in Hampstead Town. The seat they gained there in July 2022 by-election resulted from the Labour

winner of the preceding May being so alarmed by his victory that he quickly stood down. Labour lost Gospel Oak to the Conservatives in 2006 (launching the career of shadow home secretary Chris Philp), but this ward with a large 1960s council estate now seems safe for them.

Kentish Town and Highgate

8 seats

Before he moved to Downing Street, Sir Keir Starmer’s home was in Kentish Town North. It formed part of a pattern: the social history of north London and of the Labour Party can be traced by looking at the Camden neighbourhoods of Labour leaders. Hugh Gaitskell lived in Frognal, Michael Foot near South End Green in Hampstead and Ed Miliband in Dartmouth Park in the lower slopes of Highgate (his brother David resided in Primrose Hill).

Although eminent, Starmer was not unusual in being a professional who bought a house there when it was more affordable and has seen it escalate in value. Like much

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Highgate	Green	Lab	Lab	10.7	46.3	5.0	38.3	-
Kentish Town North	Lab	Lab	x	5.9	56.3	7.1	26.5	-
Kentish Town South	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.2	60.7	6.8	19.9	4.3

of inner London, these wards – Highgate included – combine ethnic diversity, high proportions of people with degrees and large amounts of social housing.

This mixture has resulted in strong Labour loyalties in recent local and mayoral elections, although margins slipped a lot in the 2024 general election. The Greens

have had a presence in Highgate since 2006 and maintained it with aplomb in the 2023 by-election, though Labour has remained in the picture. The Greens came second in the September 2024 by-election in Kentish Town South.

Camden Town

16 seats

Camden Town gave the first part of its name to the newly created borough in the 1960s. It was reasonably central geographically, though very much in the former borough of St Pancras. The town centre is one of London’s top tourist attractions and the residents of the area are an inner London mixture of class, ethnicity and housing tenure.

The southern two wards, Regent’s Park and St Pancras & Somers Town, are among the 23 (out of 692) in London with a social housing majority and the latter is the second-most Bangladeshi ward outside Tower Hamlets and Newham. It is also the most deprived ward in the borough, but London’s demographics create paradoxes – the ward also has a higher proportion of people educated to degree level than anywhere in suburban Bexley.

Regent’s Park ward, as well as being the most scarred by the construction of HS2, contains communities from across the world: there are not many places where a Greece versus Portugal football match will have

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Camden Square	Lab	Lab	x	9.7	76.6	13.7	-	-
Camden Town	Lab	Lab	x	10.6	62.4	8.0	19.0	-
Haverstock	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.9	48.1	12.1	21.3	8.5
Primrose Hill	Lab	Lab	Lab	25.2	37.6	11.3	17.0	8.9
Regent’s Park	Lab	Lab	Lab	14.5	57.3	8.1	15.9	4.3
St Pancras & Somers Town	Lab	Lab	Lab	11.4	71.3	9.0	-	8.2

supporters of both sides waving flags in the streets. Residents have been united in recent local and mayoral elections in support of the Labour Party, though that changed with the 2024 general election. Starmer’s vote in Holborn & St Pancras dropped steeply as votes flowed to a Corbynite Independent. In the September 2024 Camden Square by-election there was a large drop in the Labour vote and a left-wing Independent came second.

Primrose Hill, an affluent and attractive enclave, was linked to Camden Town under previous boundaries but

is now combined with a Hampstead area along Adelaide Road (albeit one of the more council estate parts of Hampstead). The ward could go Conservative in a good year for that party or in a bad one for Labour if the vote was split several ways.

But, in general, these wards are either genuinely safe for Labour or potential contests between Labour and forces to its Left – the Greens or in the case of St Pancras & Somers Town, the Camden People’s Alliance.

South Camden

9 seats

“South of the Euston Road” has always been its own world in Camden politics. It is the borough’s slice of central London, containing the old borough of Holborn and much of legal London, as well as Bloomsbury with its academic and literary associations. The ward grouping now reaches to the far side of Euston Road because King’s Cross ward extends up to the large redeveloped area north of the station (and anomalously takes in the small Barker Drive estate in Camden Town).

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Bloomsbury	Lab	Lab	Lab	17.6	66.4	16.0	-	-
Holborn & Covent Garden	Lab	Lab	Lab	13.7	67.9	10.1	-	8.3
King’s Cross	Lab	Lab	Lab	10.9	60.1	9.0	19.9	-

Most of the people living among the grand institutions rent their housing either from social or private landlords. According to the last Census, the population fell rather sharply between 2011 and 2021 but this may be misleading to a degree because Covid-19 meant that people with two homes were not in their town flats when the Census was taken. Holborn & Covent Garden is 45 per cent social renting. King’s Cross has student accommodation. University College and the hospital are

in Bloomsbury. The Conservatives used to be competitive in Bloomsbury, but their vote there has collapsed.

The ward to watch is probably King’s Cross. The Greens appeared to be potential winners there, given its favourable composition of young people, students and inhabitants of the new developments, but have given way to the Camden People’s Alliance, which will hope to appeal to the same group of voters.



What to watch for

To lose control of Camden, Labour would need to suffer a net loss of 19 seats compared to 2022. Six seem likely to go to the Lib Dems and maybe two to the Greens. If the Conservatives get lucky, they might win six. Could more than those 14 slip away? It looks touch and go. If Labour's majority evaporates, what then? Constructing an administration without them could be tricky. A Labour minority might still end up governing, even if its setback is severe.