

Havering

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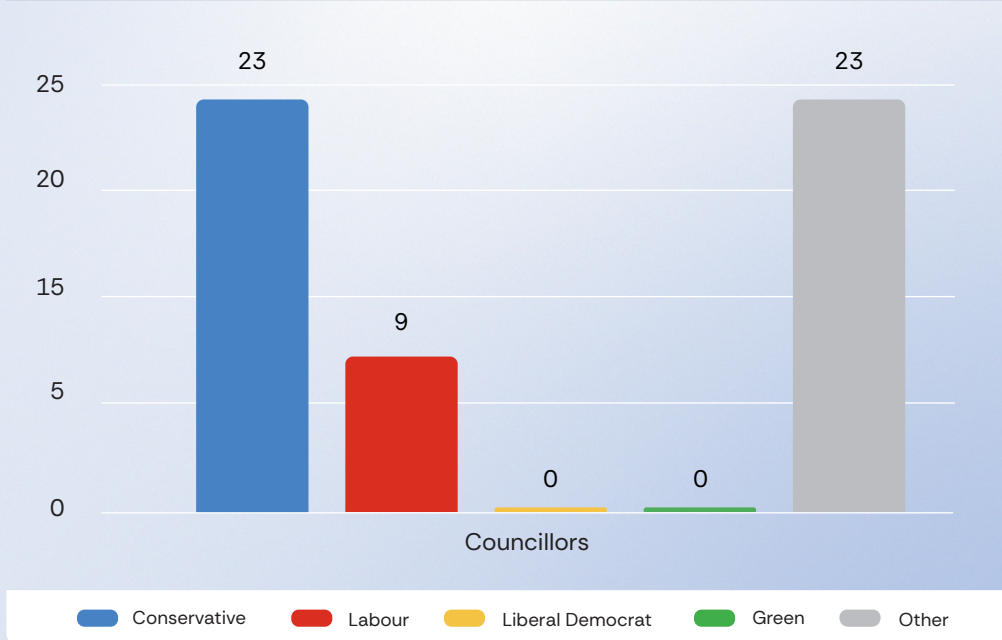
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Since 2022

No Overall Control

The local politics of Havering are novel on a heroic scale, baffling to outsiders and probably to some insiders too. Seen in isolation, the 2022 result was quirky. Seen in historical context it was routine – a No Overall Control outcome with Conservative and Residents’ Association candidates taking the lion’s share of seats between them.

Havering Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 55



By-elections since May 2022

10 AUGUST 2023	UPMINSTER	HRA HOLD
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There was a difference, though: this time, the bulk of the Residents’ Association councillors agreed to work together as a Havering Residents’ Association (HRA) group and formed a partnership with Labour to run the council. Ray Morgon, a Residents’ Association councillor for 20 years, took the helm of this arrangement. It was undisturbed by the sole by-election in the borough since 2022, but lasted only until June 2024.

Since then, the HRA group has continued as a minority administration, but Morgon has announced he will be standing down and a fandango of affiliation changes – documented in filigree detail below – has continued, some of them in pre-emptive response to an expected assault by Reform UK.

The 55 Havering councillors are now aligned as follows: HRA 25, up five since 2022; Conservatives 14, down seven; Labour eight, down one; East Havering Residents’ Group, three; Reform, three; Residents’ Association Independent Group, two. It still adds up to 55, but in a very different way from how things started. The Havering kaleidoscope will now be shaken up again.

Local landscape

Alight at the Elizabeth line station in Romford and the feel of the streets is like much of inner London – busy, cosmopolitan, connected. That’s one part of Havering’s 43 square miles. It isn’t typical. More than half of the borough is designated Green Belt and a small portion of it lies beyond the M25. In Harold Hill, as David Attenborough has recently confirmed, wild deer roam the streets by night, occasionally feasting on front garden flowers.

Havering is one of the bigger boroughs geographically and the second least densely populated (after Bromley). The average age of its residents is higher than that of Greater London but, unlike that of the city as a whole, has been coming down. It borders Essex on three sides, and a belief that it properly belongs in that county informs some of its distinctive politics.

No Overall Control has been Havering’s default elections outcome from the start – ten of the 16 so far have turned out that way – though the components of its deadlocks have shifted over time. In 1964, when the very first elections took place, Labour emerged as the biggest party. It won outright in 1971 and often beat the Conservatives right up until the end of the 1990s. After that, the tables turned.

Havering Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	26	9	1	-	-	18
2006	34	2	1	-	-	17
2010	33	5	-	-	-	16
2014	22	1	-	7	-	24
2018	25	5	-	-	-	24
2022	23	9	-	-	-	23

Residents’ Association councillors had always been in the NOC mix and since 2014 they’ve been vying with the Tories for supremacy. They didn’t overtake in 2022 in terms of seats, but the 7.6 per cent swing in their favour was one of London’s biggest.

The other significant development was a greater readiness among these hyperlocal politicians to venture beyond their wards and find borough-wide common ground. Not all of them joined in: the three victors in the Harold Wood ward, members of a registered party

Local landscape

called Harold Wood Hill Park Residents' Association, opted out and, just to make things that bit clearer, called themselves the East Haverling Residents' group on the council, an entity that has existed since 2014. Another Residents' Association councillor, representing Cranham ward, chose to maintain full independence.

Still, the other 19 banded together and joined with the nine Labour councillors to outnumber the 23 Tories. All settled, then? Not quite.

- In July 2022, three Tories defected to the HRA.
- In February 2024, another Tory made the same journey.
- Also in February 2024, a Tory travelled in the opposite direction and joined the Independent Residents' Association councillor to form a team of two (the Residents' Association Independent group).
- In May 2024, three more Tories joined the HRA. So did a Labour councillor.

By the time the HRA–Labour coalition came to a disputatious end, there were 26 members of the HRA group, 16 Conservatives and eight Labour councillors. Plus there were two separate Residents' Association groups, one of three and one of two. But that was not the end.

In July 2024, one of the HRA recruits from the Tories changed his mind and became a Conservative again. Then, drama of dramas, in October 2025, Tory group leader and London Assembly member for Haverling & Redbridge, Keith Prince, threw in his lot with Reform. In February, two more Haverling Tory councillors did the same. Unsurprisingly, Nigel Farage has named Haverling as one of his party's London targets.

Ray Morgon's decision to step down seems unmysterious. He's now been a councillor for 24 years, he's 65 years old, he's had problems with his health and he's decided that enough is enough. It's been a tough

tenure at the top: Haverling's finances have been under severe strain and Morgon, unconstrained by national party lines, has been upfront about it. He and Labour saw themselves as more outward-looking than previous, Conservative-led, Haverling Councils had been, ready and willing to engage with Transport for London and City Hall. They contrasted this with what they saw as a hangdog attitude from the Tories.

Some local politicians would do things very differently, given the chance. Reform's growing profile in the borough has been further boosted by Romford MP and arch Brexit-backer Andrew Rosindell joining Nigel Farage's party and promising Haverling a referendum on leaving Greater London – teasingly dubbed a "Hexit" by some – if his new leader becomes Prime Minister. "We are not east London," he declared, "we are Essex." Not yet, they aren't. And maybe most of them don't want to be. May could provide a litmus test.

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Electoral prospects

The 2026 elections in Havering will be about the balance between local and national factors. The strength of Residents' Associations in the borough has long been remarkable. That said, the outcomes of council elections held outside London last year suggested that local precedent might not count for much in the face of a large and fairly uniform wave of support for Reform. Despite its singular voting habits, will that now happen in Havering?



North Romford

8 seats

Havering-atte-Bower is the small village that gave the borough its name, but most of this area is privately developed inter-war (and a bit of post-war) semi-detached suburbia. Over 40 per cent of households have two or more cars, which is rare even for affluent areas of outer London – and north Romford isn't all that affluent. This is the sort of area where the ULEZ expansion was bitterly resisted and Sadiq Khan's ratings are radioactive (he polled 15 per cent of the vote in the mayoral election of 2021 compared to 68 per cent for his Conservative opponent Shaun Bailey).

In general, owner-occupied suburbs in the Romford constituency vote Conservative in local elections and those in Hornchurch & Upminster vote for the Residents' Associations.

Labour used to be competitive in Mawneys in particular, but has faded. In the 2022 local elections the Residents'

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Havering-atte-Bower	Con	Con	Con	43.8	25.0	-	-	31.2
Marshalls & Rise Park	Con	Con	Con	51.1	12.9	-	-	36.0
Mawneys	Con	Con	Con	47.1	19.1	2.6	-	31.2

Associations mounted a challenge to the Tories. They fell somewhat short, but three of the Tory councillors who've since left the party group to join the HRA came from these wards – one from Havering-atte-Bower, two from Marshalls & Rise Park.

Rosindell's defection to Reform has disorganised the hitherto effective Conservative machine. The Tories even had to cope with him attempting to use their headquarters, named Margaret Thatcher House, for

constituency work after his defection. They had to go to court to persuade him that Leave Means Leave. But even though the White British proportion of the population in this area fell from around 85 per cent in 2011 to 67 per cent in 2021, the demographics still suggest that voters in these wards will follow their MP.

Romford Town

14 seats

Television crews are fond of visiting Romford Market for Right-populist vox pops that supposedly represent England, yet the town centre itself is the part of the borough that has most in common politically and demographically with the rest of London. It has the lowest proportion of White British residents in Havering, as well as the most renters and the highest proportion with degrees, according to the 2021 Census.

It saw a dramatic ethnic transition in 2011–21, with the White British proportion falling by over 20 points. The drop in Rush Green & Crowlands was, at 25 per cent, the second sharpest in all of Greater London. The presence of its Elizabeth line station will surely tie Romford town closer to the metropolis and attract high density development.

However, for now, central Romford leans to the Right even though Labour won a seat in St Alban's ward, the area to

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Hylands & Harrow Lodge	HRA	HRA	Con	32.4	16.1	-	12.0	39.5
Rush Green & Crowlands	Con	Con	Con	45.7	37.2	-	-	17.2
St Alban's	Con	Lab	x	44.9	41.6	-	-	13.5
St Edward's	Con	Con	Con	40.5	23.4	4.2	8.3	23.6
Squirrels Heath	Con	Con	Con	51.5	17.1	4.3	-	27.1

the south of Romford station, in 2022. It was Sadiq Khan's best bit of Havering in 2021, although he still won only 25 per cent of the vote. Romford's demographics are not yet liberal enough to resist the incoming Reform tide. One of the Rush Green & Crowlands councillors who won as a Tory is among those who has already jumped ship.

Included in this group of wards are two more traditional suburban areas to the east of Romford town – Hylands & Harrow Lodge to the south-east and Squirrels Heath

by Gidea Park station. The former saw HRA gains from the Conservatives in 2022, the only such councillors from wards that are part of the Romford constituency.

They were joined by the surviving Conservative councillor, who then defected to the HRA in 2024. Squirrels Heath was solidly, sometimes overwhelmingly, Conservative for decades. However, two incumbent councillors have switched to Reform, one of them being Keith Prince.

Harold Hill and Harold Wood

9 seats

The Harold Hill neighbourhood, containing the wards of Gooshays and Heaton, is one of outer London’s most distinctive – a large, postwar, council-built estate that is effectively a small New Town. It was created in the 1940s and 1950s by the London County Council so that East Enders could move away from cramped or bombed inner city housing into a planned, green environment. The homes were – and are – attractive and spacious.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Gooshays	Lab	Lab	Lab	27.7	40.7	-	9.9	21.7
Heaton	Lab	Lab	Lab	29.1	52.1	-	-	18.8
Harold Wood	HWR	HWR	HWR	19.4	25.8	5.1	-	49.7

In recent decades there has been social change. The Right to Buy was trialled there in the early 1970s by the Conservative-controlled Greater London Council before being unveiled at national level. As a result, the proportion of social renting residents has dropped to 36 per cent (though it is still the largest in Havering) and Harold Hill is just about majority owner-occupied. Between 2011 and 2021 the overall population rose and the White British share of the population dropped steeply – down 19 percentage points – as it has in most of Havering, though it is still a majority.

Harold Hill voted Labour by massive margins for its first few decades. In the 1971 borough elections, the only year Labour has won a majority in Havering, it returned 8,300 Labour votes to just 800 for the Conservatives. It long remained solid for Labour, even in bad years such as 1982. But it went wrong for the party in 2006 when the Conservatives gained four seats and the British National Party picked up one. Labour struggled after that. Former Upminster Labour MP (1997–2001) Keith Darvill, a key figure in the 2022 to 2024 coalition administration, has represented Heaton since 2002, a lonely business in

2006–10 and 2014–18. He is standing down at these elections. The UK Independence Party won five seats out of six at its 2014 high point. Labour recovered strongly in 2022 to win all six, but without re-establishing its past dominance.

Despite its similar name, Harold Wood is a separate community from Harold Hill but is grouped with it here for geographical reasons, as it too lies off the A12 between Romford and Brentwood and is part of the Hornchurch & Upminster constituency. It is one of Havering’s more

Harold Hill and Harold Wood

9 seats

middle-class areas and traditionally owner-occupied. Once a Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginal ward, it began to change when a Residents' Association candidate won a seat in 2010. He was joined by two colleagues in 2014 and the ward hasn't changed hands since.

Residents' Association candidates have stood in Harold Hill too, but not taken root electorally – the current HRA councillor for Gooshays is the defector from Labour. With low turnout in Harold Hill in 2022 (24 per cent) and a

history of populist-Right voting, it would be surprising if Reform failed to bulldoze everyone else this time. Among the 20 candidates for the three Gooshays seats is Keith Prince. He has relocated from Squirrels Heath, which he represented during the previous council term.

The outcome looks less definite in Harold Wood, due to higher turnout (36 per cent in 2022), greater numbers in professional-managerial occupations and non-HRA Resident incumbents who can do local populism. But still the odds must favour Reform.

North Hornchurch

7 seats

Hornchurch is a long, thin settlement stretching north east to south west and split between two parliamentary constituencies. The three wards discussed here are in Hornchurch & Upminster. St Andrew's and Hacton form the centre of Hornchurch, lying to either side of the District line station. The church of St Andrew, from which one of them (self-evidently) takes its name, actually has horns on it. In housing tenure terms, the two wards are overwhelmingly owner-occupied (nearly 90 per cent in Emerson Park) and white (although Emerson Park has an affluent community of Indian origin).

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Emerson Park	HRA	HRA	x	31.5	12.6	2.1	-	53.8
Hacton	HRA	HRA	x	13.3	9.5	-	-	77.2
St Andrew's	HRA	HRA	HRA	16.7	12.5	-	6.8	64.1

In local politics, the HRA won every North Hornchurch seat in 2022. Hacton has always been a Residents' Association stronghold, but St Andrew's has been contested between them and the Tories, and Emerson Park used to be strong for the Conservatives (though it elected a UKIP councillor in 2014).

The HRA won large majorities in 2022, but running the council has been stressful and works against the sort of very local politics that Residents' Associations members excel at. It goes somewhat against the grain for wards that are otherwise attracted to the populist Right to sustain a centrist council administration. Reform will fancy their chances.

Upminster

6 seats

Upminster, at the eastern terminus of the District line, has a legendary status similar to Cockfosters as a place more spoken of than visited. When you are there, you can feel the influence of London fading away to a far greater degree than when in Romford. It is a quiet place, almost village-like, and yet an affluent suburb with Havering's highest proportion of professional-managerial residents.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Cranham	HRA	HRA	HRA	12.0	8.9	2.2	7.1	69.9
Upminster	HRA	HRA	HRA	16.7	9.2	-	8.1	66.1

Its population is more White British than almost anywhere else in London, and it changed less than the rest of Havering between the last two Censuses. The Upminster ward extends to a small rural area around North Ockendon, which is the piece of Havering that lies beyond the M25.

Upminster and Cranham have long histories of Residents' Association dominance, although not always unity – it was two of the Cranham councillors who formed the council's Residents' Association Independent Group in 2024. But if a Reform wave rolls in, even these representatives might be swept away.

South Hornchurch and Rainham

10 seats

South Hornchurch, which lies between the Rivers Beam and Ingrebourne and Rainham to the south-east, by the Thames is, like Harold Hill, one of the more working-class parts of Havering, with relatively few professional and managerial workers. Beam Park is one-third social housing. These four wards are part of the Dagenham & Rainham constituency, the only one in London where Reform was a plausible challenger to Labour at the time of the 2024 general election.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Beam Park	Lab	Lab	x	8.4	47.6	-	2.7	41.1
Elm Park	HRA	HRA	HRA	11.6	15.9	-	6.0	66.5
Rainham & Wennington	Con	Con	Con	38.7	24.8	-	7.1	29.4
South Hornchurch	HRA	HRA	x	22.9	28.5	-	5.0	43.6

Electorally, south Hornchurch has been a mess, with the Conservatives, Labour, UKIP and the Residents' Associations trading seats here and there in different elections. Labour did well to win the new Beam Park ward in 2022, but the Conservatives had an exceptional result in Rainham & Wennington. They won all three seats from the Residents' Associations, who had represented the ward since gaining it from Labour in 2002.

The winners were the only three Conservative councillors elected outside the Romford constituency, though it was they who defected en bloc to the HRA in September 2022 (including the one later returned to the Tories). With the possible exception of Elm Park, fighting off Reform here could be tough.



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What to watch for

The Residents' Associations may seem to have a firm grip on much of Havering, but how resilient will they be? And even if support for them holds up, there is a route for Reform to win a majority by simply sweeping aside Labour and the Conservatives alike.