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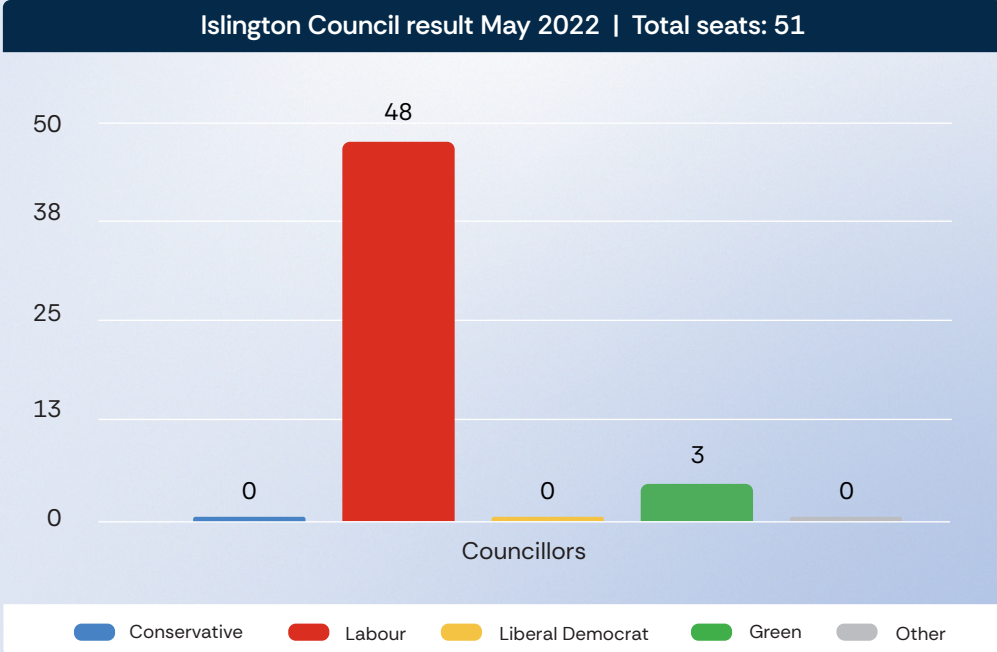
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Since 2022

Labour Defence

Labour has dominated Islington since 2014. The Liberal Democrats have disappeared from the scoreboard and only the Greens have mustered a seat or three to prevent Labour sweeping the field. The past few years, though, have seen significant action off the local authority pitch, leading to fractures in the Labour edifice that may foreshadow a different council chamber mix this time round.

Some of this, of course, is to do with local MP Jeremy Corbyn, his ejection from the parliamentary Labour Party in 2023 and his subsequent retention of his Islington North constituency as an Independent at the 2024 general election.



By-elections since May 2022

02 MAY 2024	HILLRISE	LAB HOLD
15 AUGUST 2024	HILLRISE	LAB HOLD
28 NOVEMBER 2024	JUNCTION	LAB HOLD

Four Labour councillors sympathetic to Corbyn and unhappy with Labour’s direction under Sir Keir Starmer resigned from the party in instalments between March 2023 and July 2024 to sit instead as Independents. They and the Greens combined to form a seven-strong opposition group, though no comparable arrangement appears to have been made for this year’s elections. The other big change has been at the top, with council leader Kaya Comer-Schwarz leaving in October 2024 to become Sir Sadiq Khan’s Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime. She was succeeded by Una O’Halloran.

There have been three by-elections, the most recent to fill Comer-Schwartz’s vacated seat. Labour held it with a reduced vote share, pursued by an Independent backed by the Town Hall Independents. Before that, in August 2024, Labour (again with an Independent as runner-up) successfully defended a seat that had been successfully defended by a different Labour candidate in May 2024, only for him to resign 69 days later. In a recent court appearance, he pleaded not guilty to charges of blackmail. Upheaval and mishaps have not, then, been in short supply in Islington Labour circles and the party is down from 48 seats out of 51 to 44. But opponents still have a mountain to climb if they are to dismantle the party’s majority.

Local landscape

The rise in the 1990s of an Islington stereotype involving sun-dried tomatoes, lashings of New Labour and metropolitan elitism at scale obscured the other part of the borough’s social profile, which was proletarian and poor. That hasn’t gone away. Over 40 per cent of Islington’s housing is for social rent. This is one of London’s highest proportions, as is its 43 per cent child poverty rate.

It has also, like so much of inner London in particular, become unaffordable for would-be first-time buyers and for private renters. Those able to buy paid an average of £619,000 for an Islington home, according to provisional Office for National Statistics figures for December. The average for London was £440,000. Private rents in Islington averaged £2,682 a month. Unsurprisingly, home ownership in the borough has been inching down towards 25 per cent while private renting has been climbing towards one third.

Islington is also distinguished by being the second smallest London borough geographically (after Kensington & Chelsea), covering 5.74 square miles, and its second most densely populated (after Tower Hamlets) with about 39,000 people per square mile. Its overall population stood at around 223,000 as of mid-2024.

Islington Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	-	10	38	-	-	-
2006	-	23	24	-	1	-
2010	-	35	13	-	-	-
2014	-	47	-	-	1	-
2018	-	47	-	-	1	-
2022	-	48	-	-	3	-

That number has been rising, though more slowly than across London as a whole. The borough’s average age has risen and its birthrate has fallen to become one of London’s lowest. Like other inner London boroughs, it has closed or merged a number of primary schools in recent years, as demand for places has lessened.

Labour has won 12 of the 16 full Islington Council elections held since the very first in 1964. It formed a one-party state there after three of the first four, the exception being a spectacular Conservative triumph in that party’s golden year of 1968. Since then, though, the Tories have won just three seats in full borough elections in Islington, the most recent way back in 1994.

Local landscape

Centre ground parties have been Labour's principal challengers since the early 1980s, when the elegant Canonbury Square was conspicuously festooned with banners favouring the newly-formed Social Democratic Party. In 1986, the SDP-Liberal Alliance won 16 Islington seats. The two parties merged in 1988 and the resulting Liberal Democrats established themselves as Labour's leading local threat. This resulted in No Overall Control outcomes in 1998 and 2006 and a decisive Lib Dem majority in 2002, but the orange party has been seatless since 2014, seemingly consigned to Islingtonians' electoral naughty step for joining the coalition national government in 2010.

Will the Greens now emulate past Lib Dem insurrections? There was a 5.4 per cent swing from Labour in their favour in 2022, they attracted 22.4 per cent of the popular vote and their three-seat haul – all won in the affluent Highbury ward – was their best yet. Their longest-serving councillor, Caroline Russell, who first won a seat in 2014, is standing down this time (though she will continue to serve on the London Assembly). Expectations that Islington would be a powerhouse of Your Party, the entity formed by Corbyn and Coventry South MP Zarah Sultana, have not been fulfilled due to well-documented personal and organisational turbulence at the top.

However, nine candidates will offer very Corbynite left-wing policies as Islington Community Independents standing in six wards. They include two of the current councillors who've left Labour. The Greens have put up full slates of candidates against them.

 ISLINGTON

Electoral prospects

For the most part, Islington's wards are surprisingly politically homogeneous. There are only two (Highbury and St Mary's & St James') where Labour scored significantly below 50 per cent last time and none where it topped 66 per cent.

This might reflect Islington's patchwork of wealth, poverty, education and ethnicity also being pretty uniform. No ward contains less than Highbury's 29 per cent social housing and none has fewer than Caledonian's 49 per cent graduates. Both of these figures are high by most comparisons – in a majority of outer boroughs there will only be one or two particularly posh or particularly council estate wards that reach either proportion.

All the wards are 30–49 per cent White British in Census terms and with a highly diverse range of minority communities rather than concentrations of one or another in different places.

Finsbury

6 seats

There are two Islington wards that fall wholly within London’s inner ring road, between the Angel and the City. This area approximates the old borough of Finsbury. East to west, it roughly covers the space between Old Street and Farringdon stations. North to south, it lies between those of Barbican and Angel.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Bunhill	Lab	Lab	Lab	16.8	56.0	11.2	14.0	2.0
Clerkenwell	Lab	Lab	Lab	15.9	50.2	17.1	16.9	-

It used to be a working-class quarter of central London although, being within walking distance of the City and the legal quarter, its housing has long been settled by the upper middle classes. The populations of Bunhill and Clerkenwell are 19 per cent full-time student and 55 per cent graduate, making this a particularly educated corner of central London, thanks in part to the presence of City University.

The wards were won by the Lib Dems in their better election years, even in the close-run 2006, but they’ve been all-Labour since 2014. Each ward has provided a defector from Labour to the Corbynite Independents.

Bourgeois Islington

12 seats

This area is based around the roads radiating northwards from Angel – Essex Road, Upper Street and Liverpool Road. When people invoke the Islington cliché of wealthy latte-sipping liberals living in beautiful Georgian or Victorian terraces, it is this cluster of wards they have in mind. Around 50 per cent of residents are professional-managerial and nearly 60 per cent are graduates. Former prime ministers Tony Blair and Boris Johnson have lived in these parts.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Barnsbury	Lab	Lab	Lab	17.0	51.7	13.6	17.7	-
Canonbury	Lab	Lab	Lab	18.2	50.2	14.9	16.7	-
St Mary's & St James'	Lab	Lab	Lab	14.7	40.3	31.8	13.2	-
St Peter's & Canalside	Lab	Lab	Lab	21.9	49.2	14.8	14.0	-

But that is not the whole story. Forty per cent of households are in social rent homes and there are struggling families and communities amid the wealth.

Islingtonians' voting behaviour is strikingly similar whatever their social station, but it is worth noting Labour's share being lower in these most middle-class

wards than in more working-class areas. The party has lost these wards to the Lib Dems in the past, and the latter fell only 111 votes short of winning a seat in St Mary's & St James' in 2022. Labour majorities in the other wards were flattered by a split opposition, including the Islington Conservatives' best showings.

West Islington

9 seats

Lying within Emily Thornberry’s Islington South & Finsbury constituency, this is the less middle-class section of the core of Islington. It stretches from King’s Cross past Pentonville prison and up to the corner of Holloway.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Caledonian	Lab	Lab	Lab	12.1	65.7	8.6	13.7	-
Holloway	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.9	62.5	9.4	16.1	3.1
Laycock	Lab	Lab	Lab	13.3	57.4	11.1	18.2	-

Caledonian is the most working-class, ethnically mixed and socially-housed ward in the borough. However, this being Islington, no ward is a monoculture and there are a lot of professional and middle-class people in the mix too, particularly now at the King’s Cross end.

Labour’s majorities in these seats in 2022 were large. The Lib Dems have gained seats at their past high tides, but Labour won all of them at the close election of 2006 and has held them ever since. They seem better-fortified than other areas, although one councillor in Laycock ward, near Highbury & Islington station, has gone over to the Corbynite Independents.

Highbury

9 seats

These wards are at the eastern end of the highly compact constituency of Islington North. They sit between central Islington and Stoke Newington in Hackney, and are in many ways similar to both those areas. The professional-managerial element is very large (46 to 56 per cent, Highbury's being the largest in the borough) and Arsenal and Highbury are the Islington wards with the lowest proportions of social housing.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Arsenal	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.3	53.1	12.3	22.4	2.9
Highbury	Green	Green	Green	8.8	34.8	10.9	46.2	-
Mildmay	Lab	Lab	Lab	10.5	59.2	10.5	19.7	-

Highbury has the highest owner-occupation rate (40 per cent). Arsenal has seen new development and an increase in population. It contains both the old Arsenal Football Club stadium site and its new Emirates home and is the only ward in London named after a football team.

Highbury has been the part of Islington that has resisted Labour the most. The former Highbury East ward was held by the Lib Dems before 2014, when Russell won there for the first time for Greens, becoming the borough's only non-Labour councillor in that year. She repeated the feat in 2018 and was joined by two Green colleagues in the newly-created Highbury ward in 2022.

Finsbury Park

6 seats

The two wards around the Seven Sisters Road as it passes through Holloway and Finsbury Park toward Haringey differ sharply from the parody Islington. They seem working-class and highly diverse. Finsbury Park is Islington’s most Muslim ward (21 per cent). But, just as there is a lot of social housing around Upper Street, there are a lot of middle-class professionals in the terraced streets, even though they are less grand than those of Barnsbury. One example in Tollington ward is called Corbyn Street.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Finsbury Park	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.4	62.1	6.4	17.2	9.0
Tollington	Lab	Lab	Lab	6.2	61.3	7.6	24.9	-

These have always tended to be among the most Labour-leaning wards in Islington, and they have stuck with the party even when it has had losses borough-wide. But 2026 might see the biggest challenge to those

enduring loyalties if the Greens and Left Independents can get their acts together. The Independents already have a seat Finsbury Park thanks to a defection, the only one in Corbyn’s Islington North constituency.

Archway

9 seats

None of Islington is suburban, exactly, but this section in the north-west is where the streets start sloping upwards and there are more trees on them. Hillrise ward, on the borders of Crouch End, is well-named and Junction is at the edge of Highgate.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Hillrise	Lab	Lab	Lab	6.5	64.9	9.1	19.4	-
Junction	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.3	65.7	6.6	19.5	-
Tufnell Park	Lab	Lab	Lab	4.9	49.7	5.2	40.4	-

All three by-elections since 2022 have taken place in this corner of the borough. Labour held Hillrise comfortably at the first time of asking in May 2024, but the electorate gave a less emphatic welcome to the winning candidate's short-order successor in August.

The Corbyn-aligned Independents who finished second in the latter contest and the later one for a Junction

seat won 24 and 28 per cent of the vote respectively. That was not enough to seriously threaten Labour, but the government has since become a lot less popular and the left of Labour sector may be better organised now. There seems to be potential for them: the Greens targeted Tufnell Park in 2022 and were just 124 votes short of winning a seat.



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What to watch for

The Islington prognosis depends heavily on borough-wide factors. Can the Corbynites and Greens organise a campaign on a big enough scale? If they can, the council's composition could swing strongly in their direction due to most of the wards being rather alike. If they can't, Labour should prevail as usual.