

Kensington & Chelsea

01

SINCE 2022 223

02

LOCAL LANDSCAPE 224

03

ELECTORAL PROSPECTS 226

- ↗ NORTH KENSINGTON 227
- ↗ NOTTING HILL 228
- ↗ KENSINGTON 229
- ↗ SOUTH KENSINGTON 230
- ↗ CHELSEA 231

04

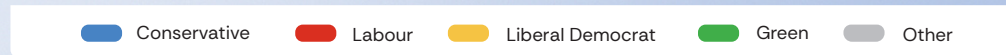
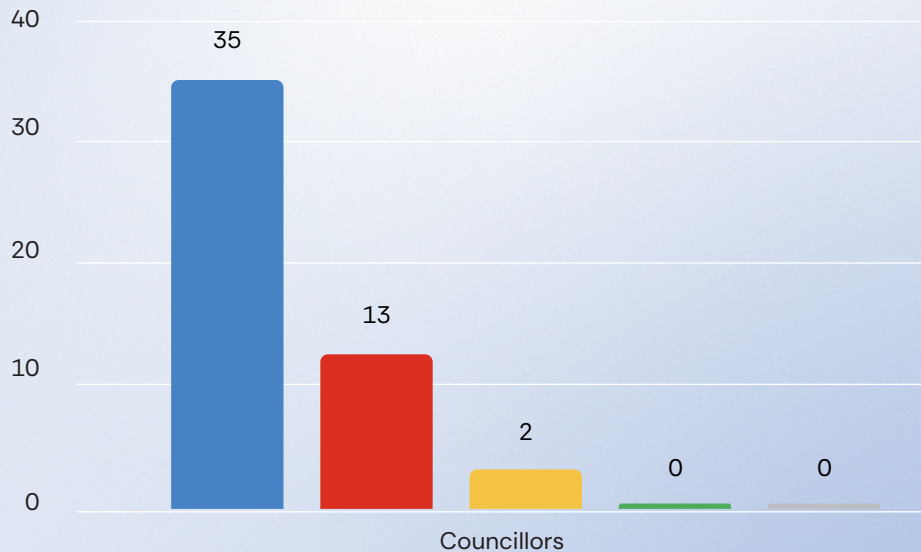
WHAT TO WATCH FOR 232

Since 2022

Conservative Defence

The political colouring of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea has long been a model of consistency. The base and most of the upright of its inverted capital "L" shape has been blue through thick and thin, and the tip predominantly red. In 2022, there were no boundary changes from 2018 and very little changing of the guard.

Kensington & Chelsea Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 50



By-elections since May 2022

Date	Ward	Result
02 MAY 2024	NORLAND	CON HOLD

The Tories took 35 seats out of 50, losing one to the Liberal Democrats who thereby doubled up to two, while Labour stayed unchanged on 13. The Conservative vote share loss was a quite modest 3.7 per cent against the backdrop of a Conservative national government in trouble. It was pretty much business as usual.

There has been one by-election, held shortly before the general election, which resulted in a Conservative hold. There have been six defections from Labour in a vivid assortment of directions. The first to go joined the Tories. The next joined the Greens. Three others have incrementally formed a leftist Independents' group. The sixth now sits for the Advance Party, which is to the right of Reform UK.

That leaves the RBKC line-up as we approach this year's elections as follows: Conservatives 36; Labour seven; Independents three; Lib Dems two; Green one; Advance one. That's an exotic combination for a borough that's been so stable politically. Counter to the London trend, there's a good chance it will revert to being less so after 7 May.

Local landscape

Covering just 4.6 square miles, Kensington & Chelsea is the smallest borough geographically and also home to the fewest people – 147,000 and falling, though still enough to make it one of the most densely populated parts of the UK. It is also ageing rapidly: the Council estimates that the number of residents who are 65 or older will increase by 40 per cent over the next 20 years. Kensington & Chelsea is distinctive, too, in being simultaneously the location of the electoral ward with the highest concentration of social housing anywhere in the capital and of some of the most expensive real estate on Planet Earth.

Its Labour-leaning northern peak, which bumps up against Brent, is where its poorer people mostly live in homes built in the 1960s and 1970s, replacing bomb-damaged, run-down Victorian dwellings on a large scale. It is here that we find the awful shell of Grenfell Tower.

Another sort of housing scandal is part of an earlier history of this part of London. The name Peter Rachman remains synonymous with slum landlordism and the pitiless exploitation and intimidation of tenants in the 1950s and early 1960s. His territory was Notting Hill, a name that has acquired many, often quite different, associations down the decades.

Kensington & Chelsea Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	42	12	-	-	-	-
2006	45	9	-	-	-	-
2010	43	9	2	-	-	-
2014	37	12	1	-	-	-
2018	36	13	1	-	-	-
2022	35	13	2	-	-	-

One, contemporaneous with Rachmanism, is the “race riot” of 1958, involving Caribbean immigrants, new to the area, responding to attacks by Teddy Boys and far-Right groups, a period enshrined in Colin McInnes’s 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners*. From those ashes rose Europe’s biggest street carnival, still with us today. Later, came

gentrification on a stellar scale, ringing social changes captured in Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004 novel *The Line of Beauty*, a tale of sexuality, class and politics in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, and mirrored in Richard Curtis’s eponymous 1999 romcom, complete with scenes from the famous Portobello Road.

Local landscape

The RBKC cultural mix also takes in part of historically bohemian Earl's Court and The Boltons, a stratospherically expensive street and garden square that inspired an "imaginary memoir" by Paul Theroux. There are brutalist architecture favourites in the form of the Trellick Tower in the north and the Worlds End estate in the south, where RBKC meets the Thames.

The place is nothing if not rich in culture and contrasts. In terms of political control, though, it has been eternally Conservative blue.

Some anticipated a post-Grenfell backlash in 2018. They were disappointed. Since that cruel disaster, the council has been utterly made over. Its leader, Elizabeth Campbell, at the helm since the month after the tower burned, has established herself as an example of Conservative stability and moderation as her party has moved towards the radical Right – she's a supporter of the recently launched Tory centrist group, Prosper UK –

and could be forgiven for taking a certain pleasure in her local Labour opposition line-up fraying.

This has been a mixture of the predictable, the novel and the strange. Emma Dent Coad, who unexpectedly became the MP for the old Kensington seat in 2017 (lasting until 2019) was always a likely early deserter, jumping ship to go Independent in May 2023, the month Jeremy Corbyn was suspended by Labour. Two others went later that year, unhappy with Labour's stance on Gaza and more, one to be an Independent, the other to be Green.

The fourth was the convert to Conservatism. The fifth was thrown out after repeated breaches of the councillor code of conduct, including re-tweeting insults about refugees and Muslims. She's now aligned with Elon Musk. The sixth and last departed in disputed circumstances last autumn, with Labour claiming he'd been deselected

and the councillor himself saying he'd already left to join the Greens, though he wasn't actually sitting as one for reasons he reportedly was unable to divulge. He's been an Independent ever since. The Tory boat has not been rocked.

↳ KENSINGTON & CHELSEA

Electoral prospects

There is some scope for greater disruption of the usual Conservative–Labour balance in 2026, but the highly uneven distribution of RBKC housing types and residents' prosperity leaves limited scope for change. The 18 wards break down into five illustrative groups.

North Kensington

7 seats

These three wards are at the northern tip of the borough, separated from the rest by the elevated Westway. Dalgarno and Golborne are home to very distinctive communities: the latter has the highest proportion of residents housed in the social rented sector (67 per cent) of any ward in London and the former is not far behind.

Some of this housing is council-built, such as the estate around the Trellick Tower, but a lot is from other kinds of social housing providers, such as trusts. North Kensington is traditionally one of London's most diverse areas – long-famous as a place where early immigrants from the Caribbean settled – and the social housing there means its character has been maintained. St Helen's ward is a

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Dalgarno	Lab	Lab	x	20.2	58.2	10.9	-	10.7
Golborne	Lab	Lab	Lab	19.6	70.1	10.3	-	-
St Helen's	Lab	Lab	x	34.4	51.1	9.4	-	5.1

bit different and more middle-class – a Conservative topped the poll there in 2014 – although it too has a lot of social housing (46 per cent).

Labour returned seven councillors out of seven in this area in 2018 and 2022, but three have them have now gone, each in a different direction.

The Advance UK convert is defending her Dalgarno seat as an Independent. The newcomer to the Greens is defending her Golborne seat and stands a chance. Dent Coad, another Golborne representative, is standing down. Several others elected in this part of the borough in 2022 are changing wards.

Notting Hill

10 seats

Notting Hill – defined here as the areas between Notting Hill Gate and the Westway – has been one of London’s most socially and politically divided neighbourhoods for decades. The ward boundaries mark an approximate separation between wealthy Notting Hill, where sleek crescents and squares distinguish the Norland and Pembridge wards, and its grittier side to the north in Notting Dale and Colville.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Colville	Lab	Lab	Lab	25.3	60.1	14.6	-	-
Norland	Con	Con	x	48.8	20.6	10.2	20.4	-
Notting Dale	Lab	Lab	Lab	18.7	71.0	10.3	-	-
Pembridge	Con	Con	x	41.1	27.4	31.5	-	-

Notting Dale resembles the wards north of the Westway in being overwhelmingly (66 per cent) social housing. These homes include the Lancaster West estate, where the ruins of Grenfell Tower still stand. Colville is a fascinating jumble of overcrowded rented housing and glamorous flats. It’s where the Notting Hill movie was filmed, and where Nicolas Roeg made Performance, released in 1970.

The northern two wards are very Labour. Their electors are more faithful than their recent representatives, half of whom have left since 2022. The party’s vote could tumble in these parts, but it is hard to see anyone else putting a winning coalition together. Pembridge and Norland are a bit of a frontier area, with the Conservatives winning though not overwhelmingly. These wards are generally low-swing, always just out of reach for Labour, as shown by Norland in the May 2024 by-election.

Kensington

12 seats

These wards lie either side of Kensington High Street – Campden and Holland to the north, Abingdon and Queen’s Gate to the south. Holland has a faint trace of the mixture of wealth and poverty found in the Notting Hill wards, but the accent is on the well-off and socially advantaged.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Abingdon	Con	Con	Con	59.2	21.5	19.3	-	-
Campden	Con	Con	Con	51.4	18.2	16.0	14.4	-
Holland	Con	Con	Con	53.1	35.3	11.6	-	-
Queen’s Gate	Con	Con	Con	53.5	15.8	30.7	-	-

Campden and Holland are more made up of owner-occupied houses than the southern wards, which run to exclusive rented flats in mansion blocks. Labour performed impressively in Holland in 2018 and 2022 without coming close to victory, rather as in Norland and

Pembridge. A single Lib Dem candidate made Queen’s Gate as competitive as it has ever been. This is not Reform territory, so it looks likely that the Conservatives will continue to have a monopoly.

South Kensington

9 seats

This is the west of the borough between Cromwell Road and Fulham Road, arranged around the Earl's Court, Gloucester Road and West Brompton stations. It is also split between the two local parliamentary constituencies (Redcliffe is in Chelsea & Fulham, the others are in Kensington & Bayswater).

The wards in this densely built-up area of terraces and mansion blocks are socially distinctive. They account for three of the four in London with the Census's highest "Other White" shares of their populations, Redcliffe having the very highest at 45 per cent. The other member of the top four is nearby Queen's Gate ward.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Courtfield	Con	Con	Con	50.1	13.5	36.4	-	-
Earl's Court	LD	LD	Con	31.5	19.0	39.6	9.9	-
Redcliffe	Con	Con	Con	47.7	20.9	31.4	-	-

Much of this is due to European Union nationals with settled status. They have voting rights in local elections and their presence informed the Lib Dems targeting these wards and getting respectable results in 2022. Linda Wade has represented Earl's Court since a by-election in September 2010.

Whether her party can improve on its 2022 performance, back when the wounds of Brexit were fresh in this prosperous, educated and pro-European part of London, is perhaps questionable, although the Conservatives might slip back a bit as well.

Chelsea

12 seats

Three of these wards are in the Chelsea & Fulham constituency along with Redcliffe, but the strongly Conservative area of Brompton and Hans Town around Harrod's is in the Kensington & Bayswater seat. Since 2024, for the first time in its history, the whole of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea has Labour MPs.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Brompton & Hans Town	Con	Con	Con	66.6	17.4	16.1	-	-
Chelsea Riverside	Con	Con	Con	40.4	32.5	27.1	-	-
Royal Hospital	Con	Con	Con	69.0	15.2	27.1	-	-
Stanley	Con	Con	Con	57.7	23.1	19.2	-	-

Chelsea is the weaker part of the highly marginal Chelsea & Fulham for Labour, with only the World's End estate and perhaps Lots Road in the Chelsea Riverside ward being strong territory. Riverside aside, this section of Chelsea is unbendingly Tory, partly because the permanent, wealthy owner-occupiers and long-term tenants are more likely to be on the electoral register than the cosmopolitan and transient residents.

The 2021 Census recorded a steep drop in population, but this may have largely reflected second homeowners being out of London during the pandemic. There is very little chance of the Conservatives being displaced except in Riverside in a good Labour year, which 2026 is not.



KENSINGTON & CHELSEA

What to watch for

The Conservatives have a solid grip in Kensington & Chelsea. Labour has its knot of wards in the north of the borough, but there are no real marginals where the two parties directly confront each other. Labour's main task will be recovering the seats it has lost because of defections. The Conservatives may look vulnerable to the Lib Dems in the south-west of the borough based on results in 2022, but they would have to lose a net 10 seats overall to be deprived of their majority. This seems highly unlikely to happen.