

Merton

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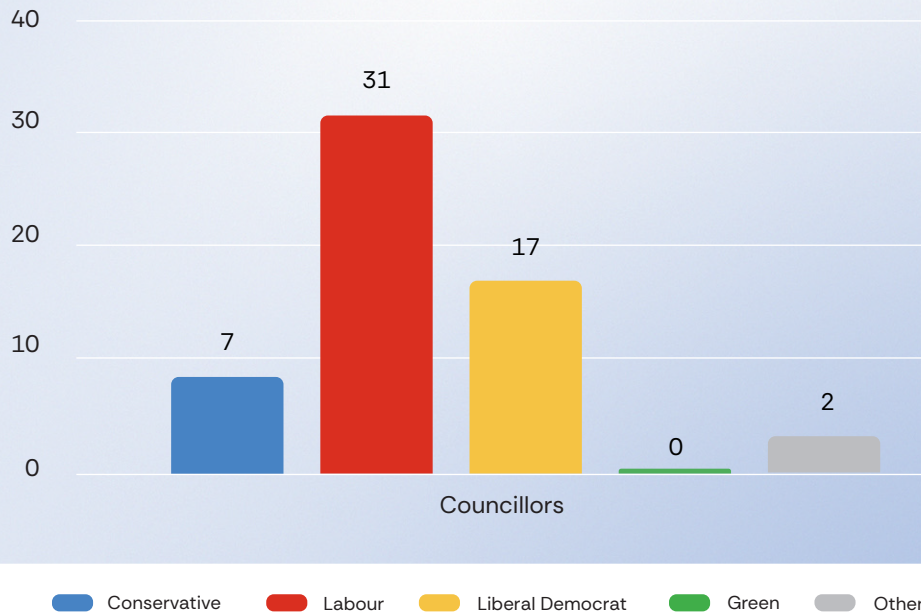
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Since 2022

Labour Defence

Labour held on to Merton council in 2022 but with a reduced majority of 31 out of 57. A threat emerged from a new quarter, namely the Liberal Democrats, who won a record 17 seats. They gained several seats from Labour although the Conservatives were the bigger losers, a pattern that continued in local parliamentary contests in 2024.

Merton Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 63



The Tories took seven and Residents' Association candidates mopped up the rest, as they have in a particular ward ever since a by-election in 1986 – a distinctive feature of a south London borough whose general political complexion in recent times has been half pretty continuously red and half subject to change from blue to yellow, although there were Lib-Con, Lab-Con and Lab-Lib split seats four years ago.

There have been two by-elections since May 2022, both held on general election day, both resulting in Labour holds by reduced majorities and both seeing the Greens finish second – a possible portent for May 2026. Labour has, though, lost one councillor who resigned from the party in January 2024 having been suspended after making social media comments about the Israel-Gaza war. She has continued as an Independent. The Lib Dems lost one councillor to a resignation in January, leaving a vacancy.

That means the party strengths as the election approaches are: Labour 30, Lib Dems 16, Conservatives seven, Merton Park residents two, other Independents, one. The Lib Dems will have high hopes of seeing Labour's majority go, but might not be able to make it happen on their own.

By-elections since May 2022

04 JULY 2024	FIGGE'S MARSH	LAB HOLD
04 JULY 2024	ST HELIER	LAB HOLD

Local landscape

Merton fits into outer south London like an obliging jigsaw piece, wedged between Kington, Sutton, Croydon, Lambeth, Wandsworth and Richmond. Historically part of Surrey, its name was chosen as a compromise after the former municipal boroughs of Mitcham and Wimbledon couldn't agree on what it should be called. It is a borough not given to drawing attention to itself, yet it has distinctive social, cultural and political characteristics.

Wimbledon is world renowned for hosting the grand slam tennis tournament of the same name. Morden, at the deepest, darkest southern end of the Northern line, boasts both Merton Civic Centre, a curvaceous modernist achievement built in 1962, and, a short walk away, the vast Baitul Futuh mosque, completed in 2003. Merton has many parks, among them Mitcham Common, Wimbledon Common and the much smaller Wandle Park, past which the river of that name, a Thames tributary, meanders.

Merton has one of the lowest borough poverty rates, bettered only by Richmond and Bromley, and fewer people sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation than most of London. Its population growth has lately matched the London average while its median age, at 35, is a little higher (and, like London's in general, rising).

Ethnically, it is 60 per cent white and about 19 per cent Asian. Christianity is by far the most commonly-

Merton Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	25	32	-	-	-	3
2006	30	27	-	-	-	3
2010	27	28	2	-	-	3
2014	20	36	1	-	-	3
2018	17	34	6	-	-	3
2022	7	31	17	-	-	2

observed religion (47 per cent as reported at the last Census), followed by Islam at 10 per cent and Hinduism at six per cent.

And politically? It switched at intervals between Labour, the Conservatives and No Overall Control until 2014, when the Tories' tide began going out and the Lib Dems progressed towards replacing them as Labour's biggest challenger, achieving that in 2022.

Ross Garrod is the council's current leader, and he looks pretty secure in his Longthornton ward. The Lib Dem opposition is led by Anthony Fairclough, whose group also contains Wimbledon MP Paul Kohler and London Assembly member Hina Bokhari. Merton is distinguished, too, by the long-time presence of Merton Park Residents' Association councillors, of whom more below.

 MERTON

Electoral prospects

Merton elections are fought according to a strange pattern. Labour has had a lock on 27 seats in the east of the borough, comprising the bulk of the Mitcham & Morden parliamentary constituency. Merton Park is safe for the Residents. In a 57-seat council, this combined block of seats has made it impossible for another party to acquire a majority even if they win everything else, as the Conservatives did in 2006.

Conversely, Labour's path to a majority only requires winning two seats from the rest of the borough. The party has a high floor and a low ceiling. The Lib Dems will again be their main challengers this time, though the Greens might fancy their chances in some wards too.

Uphill Wimbledon

11 seats

Wimbledon is one of London’s most middle-class districts, part of a belt of attractive and expensive areas that have long been drawn to the Lib Dems or their Liberal Party ancestors: Richmond since the 1970s, Kingston since the 1990s. The 2022 local elections saw the Lib Dem tide wash over Wimbledon too, and even more emphatically in the 2024 general election.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Hillside	LD	Con	x	40.2	19.0	40.9	-	-
Raynes Park	LD	LD	LD	30.1	17.0	42.8	10.1	-
Village	Con	Con	Con	47.3	11.7	30.3	10.8	-
Wimbledon Park	LD	LD	LD	27.7	18.9	37.5	15.9	-

As in the other areas of London, traditional Conservative voters were alienated by Brexit, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Theresa May might be held in better regard by them, perhaps in part because from 1986 to 1994 she was a councillor in Durnsford ward, the predecessor to Wimbledon Park.

There are distinctions to be made within Wimbledon. Broadly, if you turn right as you come out of the station and start climbing the hill, you are also ascending a social

gradient towards the most prosperous, old money parts of the suburb around the common. This area always used to be the heart of the Conservative vote, but it has collapsed quite abruptly. The swing in 2022 from Conservative to Lib Dem in was enormous – about 20 per cent overall. The Lib Dems won Raynes Park and Wimbledon Park having finished third and fourth in 2018. They will be looking to sweep out the remaining Tories in 2026.

Downhill Wimbledon

8 seats

The part of Wimbledon to the left of the railway line is on many indicators pretty much as middle-class as the uphill portion. The difference is that there are more young professionals commuting from these more tightly-packed streets and rather more of a tradition of left-liberal voting.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Abbey	LD	Lab	LD	24.0	31.5	33.5	10.9	-
Wandle	LD	Lab	x	22.9	34.1		9.7	-
Wimbledon Town & Dundonald	LD	LD	LD	22.9	13.0	52.0	12.1	-

The 2021 election for Mayor of London (unfortunately details have not been published for 2024) is something of a litmus test. While Conservative Shaun Bailey carried all but one of the uphill wards, Labour’s Sadiq Khan won the downhill wards fairly comfortably.

In recent local elections this area has produced some confusing three-way marginal contests.

Boundary changes cloud the picture, but it looks as if the same 20 per cent swing from Conservative to Lib Dem as occurred in uphill Wimbledon took place here between 2018 and 2022, with Labour losing a little ground but remaining in the game in Abbey (the area around South Wimbledon Northern Line station) and the new ward of Wandle. The Lib Dems will hope to win those two seats in 2026.

Merton and Morden

11 seats

The middle territory between Wimbledon and Mitcham is a patchwork of suburban developments amid playing fields and parks. Two wards (Merton Park and West Barnes) are in the Wimbledon constituency, the others are in Mitcham & Morden.

The distinctive feature of the area within Merton is the high rate of owner occupation: over 70 per cent in all the wards, more than in the most affluent areas of Wimbledon village. The proportion of graduates is lower than in Wimbledon and the electorate is older, particularly in the Tudor-styled Lower Morden ward.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Cannon Hill	LD	Con	Con	32.3	27.0	32.6	8.1	-
Lower Morden	Lab	Lab	Con	40.0	43.7	6.0	10.3	-
Merton Park	MPIR	MPIR	x	11.1	17.5	7.6	5.6	58.2
West Barnes	LD	LD	LD	28.4	18.7	41.1	11.8	-

West Barnes, adjoining Kingston, has a longer history of Lib Dem activity than the rest of Wimbledon. Merton Park has been represented by Merton Park Residents Association councillors since 1990 after one triumphed in a by-election the previous year. They were originally formed in order to oppose a local road extension.

The other two wards are a bit weird politically: Cannon Hill, a three-way marginal, saw a Labour clean sweep in 2014, but a Con-Lib Dem split in 2022; Lower Morden was a Labour gain in 2018 but one seat went to the Tories in 2022. Lower Morden might be a point of entry for Reform – UKIP polled 20 per cent there in 2014.

Mitcham

15 seats

These five wards encompass, approximately, the town of Mitcham, which, like Wimbledon, was a suburb of London long before it was officially absorbed in 1965. Mitcham claims to be home to the world’s oldest cricket club. The game was being played on the green there in 1707, and possibly earlier.

A man called William Figge owned land in the area in the 14th Century. Mitcham was also a centre of lavender growing, which like cricket and Mr Figge, is commemorated in a ward name. In a 1923 by-election, it became the first suburban constituency ever won by Labour.

Mitcham’s town centre is divided between Cricket Green and Figge’s Marsh, the latter area better connected since the opening of Mitcham Eastfields station. Longthornton and Pollards Hill are in the east and somewhat in the orbit of Croydon. Although there are some differences between the wards – Lavender Fields has more middle-

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Cricket Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	14.0	66.6	6.2	10.2	3.0
Figge’s Marsh	Lab	Lab	Lab	10.6	72.7	4.8	8.6	3.3
Lavender Fields	Lab	Lab	Lab	15.6	62.1	7.5	14.8	-
Longthornton	Lab	Lab	Lab	16.2	63.8	7.6	12.4	-
Pollards Hill	Lab	Lab	Lab	14.3	74.1	4.5	7.0	-

class commuters, Pollards Hill and Cricket Green have large council estates – they are uniformly diverse and working-class. The South Asian population is high by south London standards.

Labour has monopolised the Mitcham wards ever since gaining the last seat in Longthornton in 1998. In 2022, they had enormous majorities in all of them. This is a block of some of the safest Labour seats in London. Part of the reason is demographic, but much of it is to do with

the formidable electoral machine developed by Siobhain and Margaret McDonagh in the Mitcham & Morden constituency.

Merton Labour is simply very good at election campaigning, at least in the eastern section of the borough. None of these wards look good demographically for anyone else, so barring freak waves and sudden, effective targeting, Mitcham looks likely to be a rare solid area for London Labour.

South Tooting

6 seats

The communities here would probably not answer to “south Tooting”, but the Tooting railway station is here and both wards, Colliers Wood in particular, are continuations of inner London – urban rather than suburban.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Colliers Wood	Lab	Lab	Lab	11.9	55.5	8.1	24.5	-
Graveney	Lab	Lab	Lab	11.7	68.9	5.6	13.9	-

The proportion of graduates and professionals is higher than it is in Mitcham or St Helier, but lower than across the border in Wandsworth. Graveney is Merton’s most Asian ward (26 per cent), more so than any of the wards in Tooting proper.

Both wards have been Labour since 1986. The Greens achieved a decent second place in Colliers Wood in 2022 and it looks like their best target in the borough.

St Helier

6 seats

The St Helier estate was built by London County Council between 1928 and 1936 on Garden City principles. It is the second largest of the “out-estates” after Becontree in Dagenham and spans the boundary of Merton and Sutton, with two wards in each borough.

Like the other out-estates it is well-planned and still a generally attractive place to live. The north end of it is near Morden at the end of the Northern line, but the station buildings are just across the line in Merton Park ward. The Right to Buy proved popular and the social renting proportion is down to only 29 per cent in St Helier and 23 per cent in Ravensbury.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Ravensbury	Lab	Lab	Lab	15.8	63.7	7.6	12.9	-
St Helier	Lab	Lab	Lab	19.4	59.7	6.4	14.5	-

The Labour majorities in the 2022 election look just as safe as those in Mitcham, but in other types of elections there have been hints of vulnerability. In the 2021 London Mayor election, Sadiq Khan beat Shaun Bailey by only four points in this section, compared to 17 points in Mitcham proper and 27 in “south Tooting”. UKIP polled 21 per cent in St Helier in 2014 – their best ward in

Mitcham – and almost as much in Ravensbury. However, the Greens attracted 22 per cent and came second to Labour in a by-election in St Helier held on the same day as the general election.



MERTON

What to watch for

The Lib Dems have overrun the Conservative wards in Wimbledon and could wipe them out of that constituency this time, but to gain a council majority looks a stretch. One can see them getting 25 seats, but to win outright they need to pick up four from wards in Mitcham & Morden where they had single-digit percentages in 2022. More likely, perhaps, is the Greens knocking out one or more Labour wards, and they and the Merton Park Residents permitting a Lib Dem minority administration. Otherwise, it's Labour again.