

Southwark



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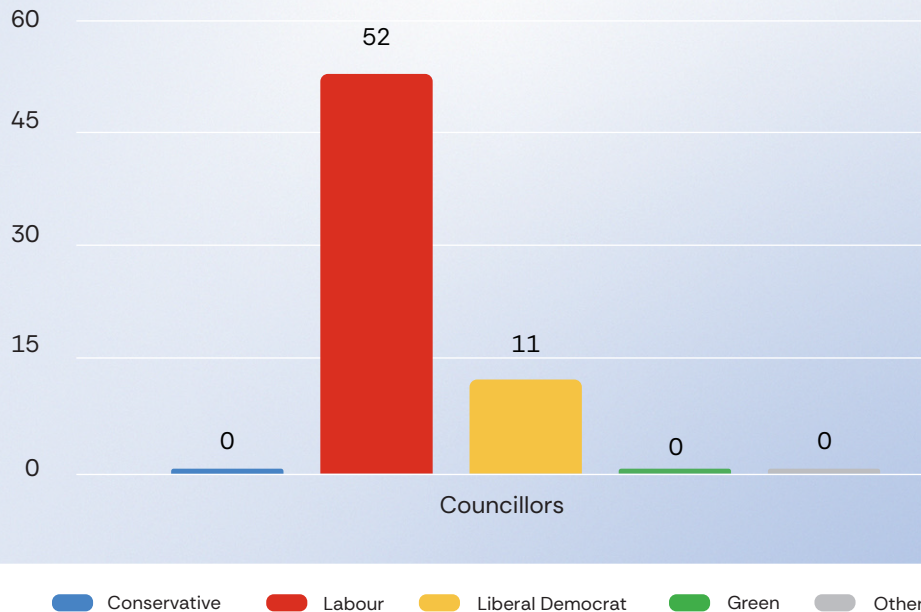
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Since 2022

Labour Defence

Labour tightened its already formidable grip on Southwark last time round, filling even more of the borough’s 63 seats than in 2018 and continuing an upward trend that began in 2010. The Conservatives were again wiped off the scoreboard and the Liberal Democrats’ eleven seats was their smallest yield since 1986. Labour’s 52 was the party’s biggest Southwark tally since 1982.

Southwark Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 63



There have been three by-elections since May 2022, each resulting in comfortable Labour holds with vote share reductions that weren’t calamitous. What, then, could possibly go wrong for Labour in 2026?

By-elections since May 2022

29 JUNE 2023	NEWINGTON	LAB HOLD
04 JULY 2024	FARADAY	LAB HOLD
04 JULY 2024	RYE LANE	LAB HOLD

The answer, of course, is quite a lot – and not only because of the Labour government’s unpopularity. There have been local troubles for the party too. In June 2025, the then-council leader Kieron Williams announced his resignation after five years at the helm. The knife-edge outcome of the ensuing leadership contest was overturned when it emerged that some votes had been invalid. A re-run produced a different winner, the current Southwark leader, Sarah King.

A string of Labour members then resigned, some in direct response to the leadership election mess, some citing Labour’s policy direction nationally. Seven have gone altogether, four to the Greens and three to sit as Independents. All but one of the latter have joined a Green and Independent Alliance group on the council. Labour therefore enters the 2026 race with 56 councillors, while the Lib Dems are unchanged. Labour can expect to sustain more losses, this time at polling stations. How many? And to whom?

Local landscape

From its long Thames frontage across the water from the City, Southwark tapers down through the ex-industrial Bermondsey and Borough, then Elephant & Castle and Camberwell and Peckham, and finally to villagey Dulwich and its southernmost point by Crystal Palace. Like its neighbour Lambeth, it is a variegated slice of south London with a varied history. At its northern edge it is linked to the centre by no fewer than four road bridges – Blackfriars, Southwark, London and Tower – two rail bridges and the Millennium footbridge, while further south it presents a mix of gentrifying inner city, very deprived neighbourhoods, pockets of gentility and some fairly standard suburbia.

The borough has undergone dramatic post-war transformations, initially in response to bomb damage, slum housing and pollution from dirty industries and transport. That period saw large quantities of social housing built, and Southwark currently owns nearly 37,000 social rent homes, more than any other borough. That is despite the demolition of the huge Heygate estate in Elephant and Castle and the ongoing reconstruction of the Aylesbury estate, both of them cause célèbres of protest groups.

Southwark Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	5	28	30	-	-	-
2006	6	28	28	-	1	-
2010	3	35	25	-	-	-
2014	2	48	13	-	-	-
2018	-	49	14	-	-	-
2022	-	52	11	-	-	-

These high-profile regenerations began after Labour regained control of the council in 2010 – which it had run throughout the borough’s previous history – following two terms out of power due to the Lib Dems equaling or besting them in terms of seats and forming

administrations with Conservative collaboration. Labour has also overseen the redevelopment of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, a 1960s construction often rubbished as an eyesore that acquired a cult status as a result.

Local landscape

Despite loud criticisms of such policies, Labour's majorities kept on increasing and a programme of new affordable homebuilding has been pursued. However, housing problems have still stacked up. In November 2024, the Regulator of Social Housing found there were "serious failings" in the council's performance as a landlord, for which Williams apologised. The Lib Dems claimed their pressure over this led to Williams's departure as leader seven months later, though he had faced trouble from within as well. He stayed on as a councillor but isn't defending his seat.

In March 2024 he was challenged for the Labour group leadership by James McAsh, at that time his cabinet member for climate emergency, streets and clean air. Local media reported there had been rumours of further plotting to remove him. It was McAsh, from the Left of

the party, who "won" the first leadership election that followed Williams's departure before the outcome was declared void. In February, McAsh became the most spectacular departure from the Labour ranks by joining the Greens. He will defend his seat in Goose Green ward, where Greens and Lib Dems shared the runners-up positions in 2022, under his new party colours.

The Lib Dems, led by Victor Chamberlain, will hope to revive their fortunes in a borough which had, in Simon Hughes, a Liberal Democrat (initially Liberal Party) MP for 32 years until 2015. Their manifesto pledges to address six issues they say are residents' priorities, including opening five new youth centres, "freezing Council Tax for the poorest" and "ensuring half of all new homes built are genuinely affordable".

 SOUTHWARK

Electoral prospects

Labour's large majority faces a generalised challenge from the Greens and a more targeted one from the Lib Dems in areas of the borough where they've been strong in the past or have chosen to focus on this time.

Borough

8 seats

These wards form the core of “Old Southwark”, an area enshrined in the name of the parliamentary constituency Bermondsey & Old Southwark. It has a mediaeval history as a sort of shadow of the City across the river and a Victorian history of industry and slums. But there is a new Southwark as well, a place where a power station became an art gallery and a recreation of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre appeared. It is a central London neighbourhood where council estates and expensive private developments border each other.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Borough & Bankside	LD	LD	LD	9.6	32.3	54.2	-	3.9
Chaucer	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.4	54.8	16.5	20.3	-
St George’s	LD	LD	x	6.3	37.4	46.2	10.1	-

Borough & Bankside has the seventh largest proportion of full-time students in London (23 per cent) and the other two wards are not far behind. Taken together, this group is second only to south Camden for being a student cluster. Fifty-six per cent are educated to degree level.

It has also been a bastion of Lib Dem support since they won both seats in the former Cathedrals ward in 1990. Like the other more middle-class Bermondsey & Old Southwark wards, it survived the coalition-era slump that cost the party most of their councillors in 2014 and the parliamentary seat the following year.

St George’s, a new ward created in 2018 following population growth, has remained more narrowly on their side. And even at their peak they never quite nailed down Chaucer. It has been solidly Labour since 2014. That said, both the Greens and the Lib Dems could pose a threat there in 2026.

Bermondsey and Rotherhithe

9 seats

Bermondsey, like many inner London neighbourhoods, has several aspects. It has been a place of breathlessly fast social change. The population is diverse, young and educated, mostly renting their flats from private or social landlords. London Bridge & West Bermondsey contains Bermondsey Street and other hipster enclaves.

North Bermondsey starts at the Shad Thames flats near Tower Bridge, a popular 1980s conversion, and continues downriver in similar vein although it also includes some more working-class areas inland around Jamaica Road and the Jubilee Line station. South Bermondsey is more solidly working-class (47 per cent social rented), as is Rotherhithe. Surrey Docks is largely 1980s (and subsequent) Docklands development along the curve of the Rotherhithe peninsula.

The council politics of Bermondsey, however, has changed in two shifts. The first was in 1986 when the

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
London Bridge & West Bermondsey	Lab	Lab	Lab	7.4	47.4	34.3	10.9	-
North Bermondsey	LD	LD	LD	9.2	29.2	45.3	16.3	-
Rotherhithe	Lab	Lab	Lab	10.5	51.3	21.4	14.4	2.4
South Bermondsey	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.8	53.0	37.1	-	-
Surrey Docks	LD	LD	LD	10.4	28.5	38.1	23.0	-

Social Democratic Party-Liberal Party Alliance broke through against Labour following its parliamentary by-election win in 1983. The second was in 2014 when the Lib Dems' popularity with urban liberals collapsed and Labour recovered a strong presence.

The most redeveloped wards, North Bermondsey and Surrey Docks, remained Lib Dem. In better contexts for

the Conservatives, Surrey Docks can opt for them, as it did in the 2021 election for Mayor of London – the only Southwark ward to do so. The Bermondsey wards and Rotherhithe remain competitive, and the Lib Dems will be looking to resume their dominance, although the Greens have been creeping up. The first defector to them from Labour represents Rotherhithe.

Walworth and Newington

9 seats

This inner London area starts at Elephant and Castle and stretches south, enclosed by Kennington Park Road, New Kent Road, Old Kent Road and Burgess Park. It is influenced by the presence of large council estates: Faraday, which contains the Aylesbury Estate, is 52 per cent social rented and Newington is 56 per cent. North Walworth includes the development that replaced the Heygate Estate and has seen its proportion of professionals rise sharply since 2011. Faraday (38 per cent) and Newington (34 per cent) have large black populations.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Faraday	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.8	59.4	8.2	15.5	8.2
Newington	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.0	64.7	12.1	14.2	-
North Walworth	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.4	58.7	13.0	16.3	2.6

Newington had Lib Dem councillors from 1998 until 2014, thanks to the party stepping up its activism in the ward after 1990s parliamentary boundary changes put it in their North Southwark & Bermondsey constituency. And despite receiving a low vote in 2022, they polled a reasonable 27 per cent in the June 2023 by-election.

Walworth also has some pre-2014 Lib Dem history, but Faraday has been solidly Labour. It is in seats like this that Labour might survive if the opposition vote divides between Greens and Lib Dems. The leader of the council's Green and Independent Alliance group was elected for Labour in Faraday in 2022.

Peckham and Camberwell

18 seats

Peckham ward is 47 per cent black, the highest proportion in London, and the neighbouring wards are also home to many black Londoners. Peckham more generally is a working-class area, which in inner London means multi-ethnic with a lot of council housing (58 per cent in Peckham ward, 52 per cent in Camberwell Green) but still a high proportion of graduates.

As with some other inner areas, gentrification and new development led to a fall in the proportion of black residents and a rise in (to use the Census category) White British in several wards between 2011 and 2021. Del Trotter’s adoption of yuppie culture in the later episodes of the sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* was only a bit before its time.

Peckham is part of a belt of exceptionally strong Labour territory stretching across south London between Brixton and Lewisham. Its Labour loyalties have rested on what have been secure foundations of social tenants, black voters and a sprinkling of precarious young graduate professionals in private rented flats.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Camberwell Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	6.7	60.1	8.2	21.6	3.4
Nunhead & Queen’s Road	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.4	51.4	4.8	38.5	-
Old Kent Road	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.8	59.8	9.9	17.1	3.5
Peckham	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.5	81.0	9.5	-	-
Rye Lane	Lab	Lab	Lab	7.1	59.3	8.5	21.9	3.1
St Giles	Lab	Lab	Lab	6.8	60.6	8.6	24.0	-

Even at Labour’s low ebb in Southwark in 2002, the Peckham fortress held firm apart from a Lib Dem win in Livesey ward (the rough equivalent of today’s Old Kent Road), which Labour regained against the national trend in 2006.

The Greens targeted rapidly gentrifying Nunhead & Queen’s Road in 2022 and achieved a large increase in their vote. They were still 500 votes short, but will be

trying again. One of the Labour trio elected there in 2022 has defected to the Greens. The party also polled an impressive 32 per cent of the vote in the whitest ward in the Peckham group, Rye Lane, in the July 2024 by-election.

In the other wards, it is simply a question of whether Labour’s electoral coalition fatally fragments or merely erodes.

Dulwich

13 seats

Dulwich, the southern section of Southwark, is the middle-class villa part of a traditionally working-class borough. Dulwich Village ward has some of London’s most highbrow demographics – 72 per cent graduate, 63 per cent professional or managerial, 69 per cent owner-occupied, 72 per cent in houses rather than flats. It also had the highest turnout of any ward in London in 2022, at 61 per cent. The other wards are less extreme but still reflect the fact that this is a stronghold of the educated professional middle-class. There are some council housing enclaves in Champion Hill and, in particular, Dulwich Wood.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Champion Hill	Lab	Lab	x	7.3	61.1	11.4	20.2	-
Dulwich Hill	Lab	Lab	x	9.5	53.0	14.0	23.5	-
Dulwich Village	Lab	Lab	x	23.1	44.0	23.6	8.2	1.1
Dulwich Wood	Lab	Lab	x	22.5	55.5	9.8	12.3	-
Goose Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	6.4	50.3	17.2	17.1	9.0
Peckham Rye	Lab	Lab	x	8.2	63.4	6.5	21.9	-

Dulwich used to be Conservative and elected six Tory councillors in 2006. East Dulwich elected Lib Dems from 2002 to 2018, but Labour had monopolies in 2018 and 2022. Dulwich Village was the last ward in Southwark to elect Conservative councillors. That was in 2014. In 2022, their third-place finish was their best result in the borough.

The Greens were creeping up in Dulwich Hill in particular in 2022 and elected Jenny Jones (now a peer) in 2006 in South Camberwell, the predecessor to Champion Hill. They will probably be the main challenge to Labour in 2026. As mentioned above, James McAsh, probably the most senior Labour to Green defector in London, will defend his seat in Goose Green ward.



SOUTHWARK

What to watch for

Having a decent-sized group on the council already is advantageous for the Lib Dems, but they may find progress confined to the north of the borough. If Labour can hold steady in the centre – Peckham, Camberwell and Walworth – and lose only Nunhead & Queen’s Road, the party will have 26 seats and need only a further six from Dulwich and the north to retain a majority. Notwithstanding the challenge of the Greens, such a final result seems possible. But there are a lot of “ifs” in there.