

# Sutton

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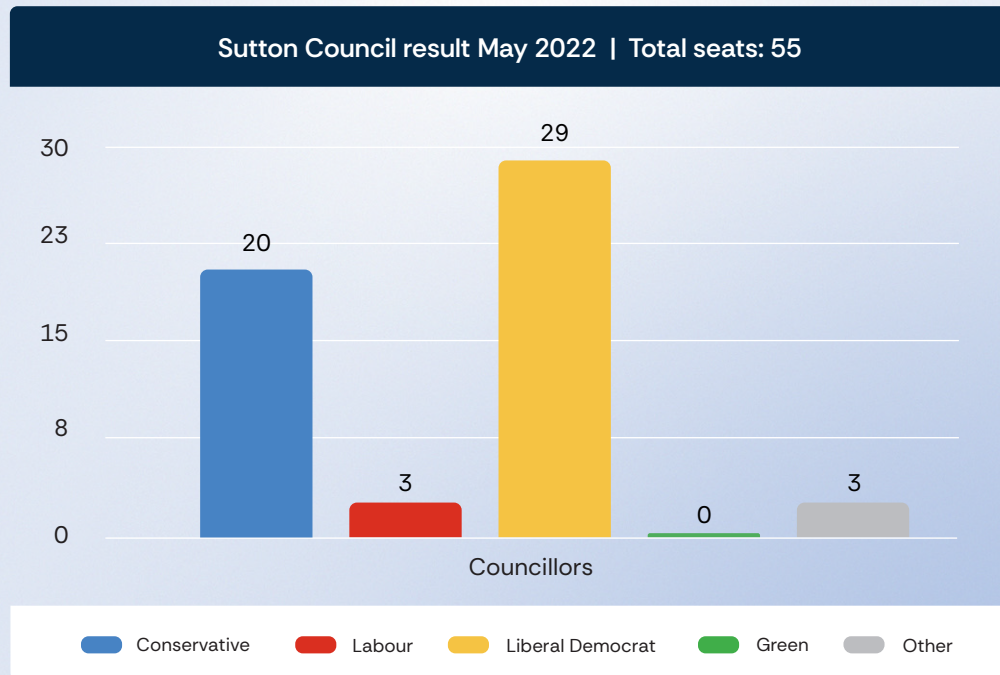
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# Since 2022

## Liberal Democrat Defence

The ability of the Liberal Democrats to stay in control of Sutton is one of the wonders of London politics. Each time elections approach the borough’s social composition, its 2016 Leave majority and sometimes national trends seem to point to the Conservatives winning. Somehow, it never happens. Last time, though, the borough came very close to No Overall Control: Lib Dems 29, Conservatives 20, Labour three, Sutton Independent Residents three. Could the balance of power finally change this time?

There is evidence suggesting it might not. The Tories aren’t flying high anywhere just now and Reform UK sees Sutton as a place where it can make a mark from the Right. The Tories took a seat from Labour in the first by-election of the current term, but their vote share was down in a ward Reform will have its eye on. In spring 2025, the Lib Dems defended with some style two seats in different wards where Tories offered the main challenge but Reform candidates finished third. The Lib Dems would have prevailed even had all the Reform votes in those two contests gone to the Tories instead, but the outcomes showed the problem Sutton Conservatives face.



**By-elections since May 2022**

|               |                                 |                   |
|---------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 2 MAY 2024    | ST HELIER WEST                  | CON GAIN FROM LAB |
| 10 APRIL 2025 | SUTTON CENTRAL                  | LIB DEM HOLD      |
| 22 MAY 2025   | CARSHALTON SOUTH AND CLOCKHOUSE | LIB DEM HOLD      |

In May 2024, Ruth Dombey, who had been leader of the council since 2012 and led her party to three victories, stood down. Her successor, Barry Lewis, has lost one member of his group, who left to be a standalone Independent, separate from the established group of three Independent Residents Association councillors. Thus, the Lib Dems are defending a majority reduced to one and the Tories have inched a little closer. But fragmentation is a factor on the Right in this borough. It could be a good friend to the resilient Lib Dems.

# Local landscape

Sutton is an all-suburban outer London borough, a configuration of towns, villages and residential settlements whose southern border is with Surrey. Its civic centre is in the town of Sutton itself. It also contains Cheam, Carshalton, Wallington, Beddington and mid-century developments of both privately-owned homes, such as Worcester Park, or municipal estates such as St Helier. There is a lot of green space in Sutton and it is one of four boroughs through which the River Wandle flows.

The London borough was assembled from two former municipal boroughs, Sutton & Cheam and Beddington & Wallington, and the erstwhile Carshalton urban district council, having previously been part of Surrey. Tony Travers, in his book London's Boroughs At 50, wrote: "The London border in the south of the borough was one of the most contested elements in reform of the capital's government in the early 1960s." Places such as Epsom, Banstead, Weybridge and Esher were eventually left outside the new Greater London, but it was a close thing.

Sutton has no London postcode areas, contributing to a sense of it pining for pre-Greater London days. For example, few London boroughs have grammar schools in them, but Sutton has five, the highest figure in the capital. This stems from the refusal in 1978 of a past Conservative leader of the council to quickly implement the national Labour government policy of making all secondary schools comprehensive. The change of government to a Conservative one in 1979 enabled them to stay.

| Sutton Council elections since 2002 |     |     |    |          |       |       |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-----|----|----------|-------|-------|
| Year                                | Con | Lab | LD | UKIP/Ref | Green | Other |
| 2002                                | 8   | 3   | 43 | -        | -     | -     |
| 2006                                | 22  | -   | 32 | -        | -     | -     |
| 2010                                | 11  | -   | 43 | -        | -     | -     |
| 2014                                | 9   | -   | 45 | -        | -     | -     |
| 2018                                | 18  | -   | 33 | -        | -     | 3     |
| 2022                                | 20  | 3   | 29 | -        | -     | 3     |

The Lib Dems' stubborn hold on Sutton took root in 1986 when its forerunner, the SDP-Liberal Party Alliance, won the largest number of seats, falling just one short of a majority. Four years later, the newly-forged Lib Dems took full control and have repeated that achievement ever since, sometimes by huge margins, despite Sutton's

demographics being not as obviously Lib Dem-friendly as nearby Kingston's or Richmond's.

Some of the borough's results in recent years have been a bit counter-intuitive, too. For example, in 2018, the Conservatives made progress against the wider London


# Local landscape

trend. That year also saw three Residents' Association candidates win all three seats from the Lib Dems in a ward in Beddington after running a campaign against plans to build an incinerator there. They retained their seats in a successor ward in 2022, when the Tories again swam successfully against larger political tides.

Indeed, the 2022 result was even closer than the seats tally shows: another 51 votes for the Conservatives in each of two wards and Sutton would have gone to No Overall Control. Perhaps that explains why both of the local Lib Dem MPs, Bobby Dean and Luke Taylor,

have served out their terms as councillors rather than resigning, creating the risk of by-election losses.

In 2014, though, the opposite was the case. The Lib Dems scored their biggest ever triumph, a 45-9 thrashing of the Tories. If they are feeling nervous this time, they can take comfort from that thumping outcome. It coincided with the high point of support for UKIP, whose 18 per cent share of the popular vote that year might well have harmed the Tories. Should Reform have the same effect on a bigger scale in 2026, the Lib Dems could be laughing.

 SUTTON

# Electoral prospects

As a general rule, the further south you go in Sutton, the more prosperous it becomes, although there are some exceptions. There is a rough political dividing line running from north west to south east, with the Tories strongest on the Surrey side, though several wards there hang in the balance.

# Cheam and Worcester Park

12 seats

These wards are to the west of the A217 road, one of London’s secondary arteries running from Fulham to Gatwick Airport. Worcester Park station is at the edge of the borough, on the border with Kingston and a stone’s throw from the northern tip of the Surrey district of Epsom and Ewell. Cheam has London’s ninth highest proportion of detached houses (37 per cent).

| Ward-level results (2022) | Councillors 2022 |     |     | Vote share percentage 2022 |      |      |       |       |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----|-----|----------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
|                           | 1                | 2   | 3   | Con                        | Lab  | LD   | Green | Other |
| Cheam                     | Con              | Con | Con | 45.7                       | 11.1 | 30.6 | 12.6  | -     |
| North Cheam               | Con              | Con | Con | 43.4                       | 12.9 | 31.6 | 9.3   | 2.8   |
| Stonecot                  | LD               | LD  | x   | 35.8                       | 16.1 | 42.0 | 6.0   | -     |
| Worcester Park North      | Con              | Con | x   | 42.3                       | 16.3 | 32.8 | 8.5   | -     |
| Worcester Park South      | Con              | Con | x   | 49.6                       | 16.0 | 34.4 | -     | -     |

The Conservatives won this patch of Sutton by 10 seats to two in 2022 – as they had in 2018 on different boundaries – gaining two in Worcester Park North and losing two in Stonecot. But at the Lib Dem high tide of 2014 the balance was 10–2 the other way, with the Conservative holdouts being in Cheam. It remains marginal territory and a 10–point swing to the Lib Dems would probably be enough to win every seat, though

councillors here do seem to be rewarded with personal votes.

What about Reform? In 2014, UKIP won 14 per cent in Cheam and averaged 21 per cent in the other wards. But Reform would have to do significantly better to challenge for a seat rather than merely splitting the right-wing vote to the benefit of the Lib Dems.

# Sutton

12 seats

Sutton is the largest town in the suburban agglomeration that makes up the borough to which it gives its name. There has been population growth and densification around the station, affecting Sutton Central and Sutton South wards. There are many older privately developed blocks of flats as well around the centre. These distinguish Sutton – and other outer London towns, such as central Bromley – from further-out suburbs

The old Liberal Party’s first breakthrough in Sutton local elections followed the parliamentary by-election win for their candidate Graham Tope in Sutton & Cheam in 1972. Although Tope lost the seat two years later, he was elected to the council for the Sutton Central ward in May and brought five colleagues with him. By 1986 the SDP–Liberal Alliance was winning all the seats north of the railway line, although it was not until 2022 – against the trend elsewhere – that the Conservatives were eliminated from Sutton South.

| Ward-level results (2022) | Councillors 2022 |     |     | Vote share percentage 2022 |      |      |       |       |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----|-----|----------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
|                           | 1                | 2   | 3   | Con                        | Lab  | LD   | Green | Other |
| Belmont                   | Con              | Con | Con | 41.7                       | 14.8 | 31.9 | 11.5  | -     |
| Sutton Central            | LD               | LD  | LD  | 22.6                       | 28.0 | 37.6 | 11.8  | -     |
| Sutton North              | LD               | LD  | Con | 36.4                       | 15.2 | 37.0 | 10.9  | -     |
| Sutton South              | LD               | LD  | LD  | 37.5                       | 15.2 | 47.2 | -     | -     |
| Sutton West & East Cheam  | LD               | LD  | LD  | 39.7                       | 14.3 | 46.0 | -     | -     |

Labour had a good go at Sutton Central in 2022, but their vote plunged in the April 2025 by-election to the benefit of the Lib Dems. Sutton North has been Lib Dem since the ward was created in 2002, although the Conservatives won a single seat there in 2006 and 2022 and it has always been marginal. It was the ward represented by Ruth Dombey.

Belmont, in the deep south of Sutton, has been all-Conservative since boundary changes in 2002, although sometimes not by huge margins. With similar areas of next-door Surrey turning Lib Dem, it might be vulnerable this time.

# Carshalton

9 seats

Carshalton lies to the east of Sutton. It has a reputation for being prosperous suburbia, an older village beside a lake augmented by middle-class 19th and 20th Century development and served by two commuter stations. As with the rest of the borough, it gets more affluent the further south it goes.

Carshalton South & Clockhouse ward is the most car-owning in Sutton: 46 per cent of households have two or more of them. Clockhouse, incidentally, is a small area of Coulsdon which is otherwise across the borough boundary in Croydon. Carshalton Central is the most middle-class (professional and managerial) ward in the borough.

| Ward-level results (2022)     | Councillors 2022 |     |    | Vote share percentage 2022 |      |      |       |       |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----|----|----------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
|                               | 1                | 2   | 3  | Con                        | Lab  | LD   | Green | Other |
| Carshalton Central            | LD               | LD  | LD | 22.9                       | 8.8  | 38.8 | 26.8  | 2.7   |
| Carshalton South & Clockhouse | Con              | Con | LD | 43.0                       | 7.8  | 39.0 | 10.2  | -     |
| The Wrythe                    | LD               | LD  | LD | 33.6                       | 14.7 | 40.0 | 11.7  | -     |

The Lib Dems enjoyed a crushing win when they defended their seat in the May 2025 Carshalton South & Clockhouse by-election. The Conservatives held on to second place, but Reform was nipping at their heels. This suggests that the Lib Dems are in a good position to defeat the other two Conservatives in a ward that has given a split verdict ever since 2010.

A single Green candidate polled respectably in Carshalton Central in 2022 and The Wrythe was one of UKIP's better wards in 2014.

# St Helier and Hackbridge

9 seats

The St Helier estate, one of the large “cottage” developments built by the London County Council in the inter-war period, straddles the boundary between Sutton and Merton and falls into two wards. The Sutton section is now only 39 per cent social renting due to the Right to Buy, but St Helier as a whole is still largely a white working-class area (only 28 per cent of the population are graduates, which is very low for London). Hackbridge is a development area with the high-density New Mill Quarter appearing near the station. The population there increased by over 1,800 between 2011 and 2021 and it has attracted younger commuting professionals.

| Ward-level results (2022) | Councillors 2022 |     |     | Vote share percentage 2022 |      |      |       |       |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----|-----|----------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
|                           | 1                | 2   | 3   | Con                        | Lab  | LD   | Green | Other |
| Hackbridge                | Lab              | Lab | x   | 19.2                       | 53.0 | 27.8 | -     | -     |
| St Helier East            | LD               | LD  | x   | 23.6                       | 29.2 | 39.7 | 7.5   | -     |
| St Helier West            | Lab              | Con | Con | 31.1                       | 31.4 | 27.9 | 9.5   | -     |

As with other outer London estates (see also Bromley, Croydon, Havering and Redbridge) the Labour vote has ebbed over time in Sutton’s part of St Helier. The party won 96 per cent of the vote in the St Helier wards in 1971, but lost to the Lib Dems in 2006 and did not get another look-in until 2022.

Labour’s success in Hackbridge last time was built partly on complaints about the council’s heating system: one of

their successful candidates was the leader of an active residents’ association. The other has had a controversial term of office and moved to southern Spain. He won’t be standing again.

Like the other outer London estates, St Helier has potential for Reform. In 2014, UKIP fell only 24 votes short of winning a seat in St Helier East’s predecessor seat, Wandle Valley.

# Wallington and Beddington

12 seats

Wallington and Beddington are at the eastern end of the borough, on the road from Sutton to Croydon. Following the general rule, the areas south of the railway line are more middle-class, home-owning and Conservative than those to its north, though there is a partial exception in that the South Beddington & Roundshaw ward links a plush suburb with the somewhat isolated Roundshaw council estate on the site of the former Croydon Airport. Not many wards can boast 26 per cent detached houses and 36 per cent social housing.

| Ward-level results (2022)    | Councillors 2022 |      |      | Vote share percentage 2022 |      |      |       |       |
|------------------------------|------------------|------|------|----------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
|                              | 1                | 2    | 3    | Con                        | Lab  | LD   | Green | Other |
| Beddington                   | SIRG             | SIRG | SIRG | 19.1                       | 15.9 | 19.0 | 10.6  | 35.4  |
| South Beddington & Roundshaw | Con              | LD   | Con  | 39.0                       | 12.8 | 37.5 | 6.2   | 4.6   |
| Wallington North             | LD               | LD   | LD   | 21.3                       | 12.1 | 40.2 | 10.2  | 16.3  |
| Wallington South             | LD               | LD   | LD   | 24.5                       | 13.6 | 49.3 | 9.0   | 3.5   |

Turnout in Roundshaw is sometimes very low, but Reform was able to energise low-propensity voters in the 2025 county council elections elsewhere in England, so they might repeat that success here.

The Lib Dems used to win the now defunct Beddington North ward until the row over the siting of an incinerator. In 2018, a trio of Independents, led by a former Lib Dem

councillor, won all the seats and retained them in the successor ward, Beddington, in 2022. However, their hold seems less secure than, say, that of counterparts in Merton who objected to a road scheme and have won every seat in their south London ward since 1990. While many Sutton wards were marginal in 2022, the largest Lib Dem majorities were in the two Wallington wards. They have been Lib Dem at every election since 1994.



SUTTON

## What to watch for

Betting against the Lib Dems in Sutton has seemed an attractive proposition several times since 1990 for national or local reasons, but you would have lost your money every time. The by-elections held since 2022 have shown strong swings in their favour, as did the parliamentary elections in 2024. Might they do even better than the 45–9 majority they won in 2014?