

Tower Hamlets

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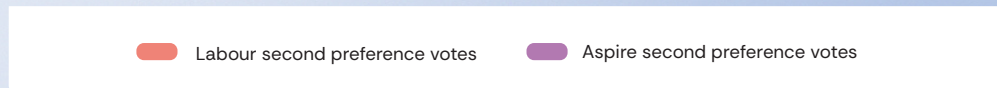
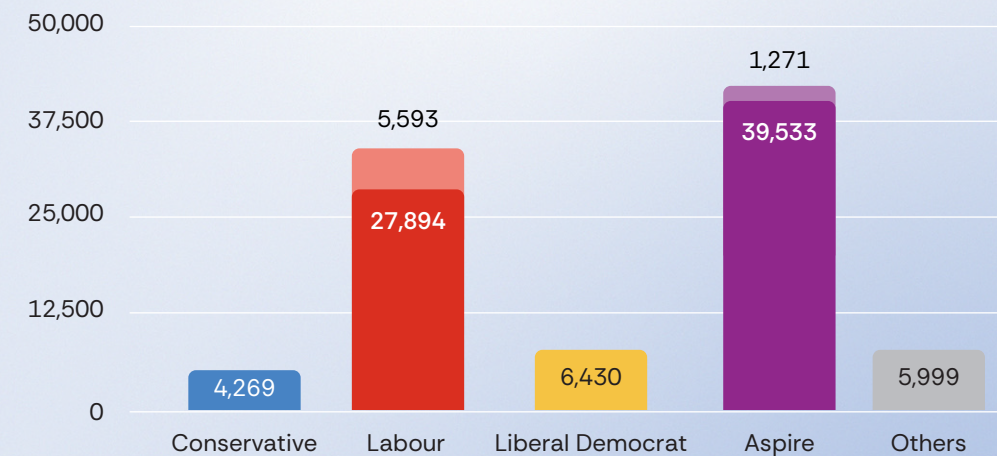
Since 2022

Aspire Defence

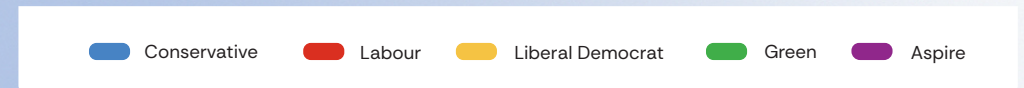
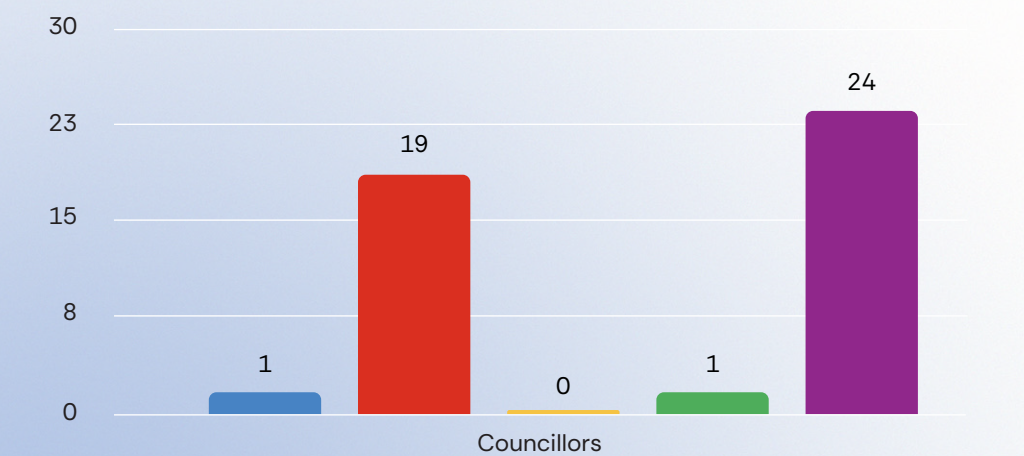
Since 2010, the political story of the core East End borough has been largely about the rise, fall and rise again of Lutfur Rahman, leader of the local Aspire Party and the borough's directly elected Mayor. His clear victory in the mayoral race of 2022 - by 55 per cent to his Labour opponent's 45 per cent once second preferences were counted - came after he had completed a five-year ban on seeking political office. Rahman had won the borough's inaugural mayoral contest four years earlier as an Independent, having been dumped as Labour's candidate. Today, Aspire might claim to be the most important local party in the land.

Rahman's local popularity will make it hard for Labour to win the mayoralty or a council majority, which it also lost last time round. Aspire's council seat triumph was not crushing - it won 24 seats to Labour's 19, with the Conservatives and the Greens taking one each. But Labour's current national unpopularity makes Tower Hamlets one of the boroughs least likely to change hands.

Tower Hamlets mayoral election result 2022



Tower Hamlets Council result May 2022 | Total seats: 45



By-elections since May 2022

12 SEPTEMBER 2024

BOW EAST

LAB HOLD

That is despite the administration becoming subject to a ministerial intervention – a Best Value inspection is ongoing – and some musical chairs among the 45 councillors who took their seats last time.

There has been just one by-election, resulting in a Labour hold in which Aspire did not compete, seemingly to give the Greens, who finished second, a clear run. But Aspire has had four councillors convert to being Independents, while also picking up two from the Labour group, both of them women. Before that there had been none. Labour has seen one member of its original line-up go Independent.

The net outcome ahead of 7 May is that Aspire has dropped to 22 seats and Labour to 16. Rahman and his party won't have things all their own way, and there were several split and close-run wards last time. But they have to be favourites to prevail once more.

Local landscape

The Tower Hamlets area has an extraordinary past, a complicated present and a huge part to play in London's future with a fast-growing, youthful population.

Its character has been formed by big events and large forces — successive waves of immigration, the proximity of the Thames, the devastation caused by the Blitz and the redevelopment of former docklands into the gleaming towers of Canary Wharf.

Despite the wealth associated with the latter, Trust for London has found that Tower Hamlets has London's highest poverty rate (40 per cent), its highest child poverty rate (47 per cent) and its worst income deprivation. These social ills are at their most pronounced where the borough abuts that other crucible of London's financial power, the Square Mile. The contrast between the City and Whitechapel has always been abrupt: polite Victorian society saw the East End as a different world, the dark side of London where social reformer such as William Booth performed good works.

For generations it has accommodated refugees, Huguenots, Jews and Bengalis. It has also witnessed pivotal events in labour movement and socialist history. The 1988 match girls' strike in Bow was a workers' rights landmark. The East End is strongly associated with George Lansbury who, before he became leader of the Labour Party, fought a 1912 local by-election on the issue of female suffrage and in 1921 led the Poplar Rates Rebellion, which saw him and 29 fellow councillors jailed. This and the 1936 Battle of Cable Street in Shadwell, which saw an alliance of Irish and Jewish East Enders block a march through their area planned by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, continue to be revered by the Left.

In a sense, Rahman and Aspire are a continuation of an East End political history in which community politics in various forms have long flourished. Jewish radicals were active in the 19th Century. The initials of the former Stepney Borough Council are jokingly said

to have stood for "Sullivan Brother and Cousins" (or similar), so entrenched were Irish East Enders in the Town Hall's corridors of power. More recently, Muslim voters, predominantly Bangladeshi, contributed to George Galloway's rancorous general election win in Bethnal Green in 2005.

Most of the borough's wealth is to be found in the wards along the Thames in the former domain of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), set up in 1981 to drive the regeneration of derelict docks and abandoned warehouses. This process was already underway: redevelopment for new businesses and well-off residents took place at St Katharine Dock, right by Tower Bridge, in the early 1970s. But the LDDC was the big game-changer, leading to the Docklands Light Railway and the cluster of bank towers at Canary Wharf itself. Tower Hamlets, even by London standards, contains extremes of wealth and poverty.

Local landscape

Rahman’s second mayoral win in 2014 was annulled by an election court decision that found him to have won with the help of “corrupt and illegal practices”. Its findings were precise and sometimes scathing, though it was careful to point out that although it found examples of invalid votes being cast it could not be concluded from this that such votes had (or had not) been cast on a large and decisive scale, as some of Rahman’s enemies had claimed. There is no question that he enjoys substantial local support.

That said, Rahman continues to be the object of media and political suspicion. Labour’s “best value” intervention, formally commencing in January 2025, is but the latest of its kind. The issues raised are familiar: an inward-looking “culture of patronage” focused on maintaining political support at the expense of building partnerships for the benefit of the borough as a whole.

Not every Bangladeshi Londoner in Tower Hamlets votes for Rahman and Bangladeshi Londoners are his only voters. But a reluctance to risk alienating that core of support can be detected in, for example, his wariness of development that might be deemed gentrifying, his opposition to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods which are unpopular with supporters who rely on motor vehicles to make a living, and his indulgence of swathes of flags of Palestine being hung on Whitechapel lampposts as the Israel-Gaza war got underway. Labour’s experienced Sirajul Islam will do well to unseat him.

Tower Hamlets Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	-	35	16	-	-	12
2006	7	26	6	-	-	1
2010	8	41	1	-	-	1
2014	5	22	-	-	-	18
2018	2	42	-	-	-	1
2022	1	19	-	-	1	24

 TOWER HAMLETS

Electoral prospects

Tower Hamlets is characterised not only by the extreme contrasts between its wealthiest and poorest areas, but also by surprising variations within and between wards in different places. Voting patterns often reflect personal support for candidates. There have been many close contests between Labour and local parties, the most significant now being Aspire. Dubious tactics are not unknown.

This year sees a new addition to the array of options for voters. The Tower Hamlets Independents are contesting the mayoralty and almost every one of the borough's 45 seats, promising cleaner streets, greater financial efficiency and more affordable homes. Some Tower Hamlets residents face the longest ballot papers in London, with a choice of over 20 candidates.

Docklands

10 seats

Wealth in Tower Hamlets is concentrated in these wards, close by the loop of the Thames that is instantly familiar from the title sequence of EastEnders. Things have changed a lot since the series began in 1985. There’s been continuing growth and development.

The Isle of Dogs wards – Blackwall & Cubitt Town, Canary Wharf, Island Gardens – added 14,000 residents in 2011–21 although the other two wards have been more stable. St Katharine’s & Wapping – which contains the Tower of London – is the most graduate and middle-class ward in Tower Hamlets and four of the five – the odd one out is Island Gardens – are over 50 per cent professional-managerial. In that, they are unlike anywhere else in Tower Hamlets.

But although the contrast between Docklands and the rest of Tower Hamlets is sharp, it should not be overstated. The borough in general now has a lot of graduates, in keeping with having a young population, and professionals. Docklands may have fewer Muslims

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Blackwall & Cubitt Town	Aspire	Aspire	Aspire	18.9	24.5	14.6	12.0	29.9
Canary Wharf	Aspire	Aspire	x	12.6	22.7	9.3	-	55.4
Island Gardens	Con	Lab	x	26.8	24.8	12.0	12.6	23.8
Limehouse	Lab	x	x	22.2	40.2	10.5	7.9	19.2
St Katharine’s & Wapping	Lab	Lab	x	17.2	31.9	27.1	10.5	13.3

than the rest of the borough (19–26 per cent) but the proportion in every one of the five wards is above the London average.

The British National Party won its first ever council seat in a by-election Docklands – the old Millwall ward – in 1993, but Labour made a clever appeal to the “yuppie” vote with the slogan “BNP = negative equity” and regained it in 1994. They have since tended to be ahead of local parties. Conservative councillors have always been entirely confined to this area including in 2010, when they hit their peak of eight seats.

A personal vote saved their sole re-elected councillor last time. Peter Golds has been on the council since 2006, which was the first year Tories won any seats in Tower Hamlets.

He previously served in Brent and was a friend of John Major in 1960s Lambeth. Golds is again standing in Island Gardens ward and might see some colleagues returned with him this time, particularly in Canary Wharf where an ex-Tory Independent split the vote in 2022 (the same candidate is trying his hand in Blackwall & Cubitt Town this year). Labour will hope a splintered vote between the Greens and Aspire will see them through.

Whitechapel and Stepney

11 seats

These are the inner East End wards, stretching from the City borders at Aldgate along Whitechapel Road and Commercial Road.

They have a strong Asian and Muslim presence: Shadwell and Stepney Green are majority Bangladeshi by ethnicity and St Dunstan's is also majority Muslim. Shadwell is the most Muslim ward in London (60 per cent) and the other two are second and third (56 per cent). Despite its name and having Brick Lane running through it, diverse Spitafields & Banglatown ward is only the eighth most Bangladeshi ward in the borough.

More older housing survived the war in Whitechapel and Spitafields than in Stepney, which was heavily bombed then redeveloped in the 1940s and 1950s, creating a near-monopoly of council housing. St Dunstan's ward includes the large Ocean Estate. Shadwell is still majority social renting and the eastern wards of Stepney Green and St Dunstan's are nearly so.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
St Dunstan's	Lab	Lab	x	5.0	42.3	6.6	9.2	37.1
Shadwell	Aspire	Aspire	x	3.5	18.3	30.5	5.6	42.0
Spitafields & Banglatown	Aspire	Aspire	x	4.5	40.2	6.3	7.6	41.5
Stepney Green	Aspire	Lab	x	4.5	36.1	15.4	7.0	36.9
Whitechapel	Aspire	Lab	Aspire	4.8	29.4	11.6	8.9	34.5

Politically, this is uncertain territory where allegiances are fluid and personality-based. It has swung back and forward at each election in recent years. In 2010, Labour won 10 seats and Respect won one. In 2014, the Rahman-led local party Tower Hamlets First won ten and Labour just one. In 2018, Labour went back up to

ten and the People's Alliance of Tower Hamlets (PATH), a local party formed by ex- Rahman cabinet member Rabina Khan, who contested the 2015 mayoral election re-run as an Independent in 2015, and her husband. And in 2022, Aspire outscored Labour 7-4. Khan later joined the Lib Dems, and their 2022 Shadwell vote in 2022 was for her.

Bethnal Green

8 seats

The Bethnal Green neighbourhood is the north west part of Tower Hamlets. Weavers ward is in the corner next to Shoreditch and contains the Boundary Estate, one of the first large council estates in London. Formally opened in 1900, it was built on the site of a notorious slum “rookery” called Old Nichol. The other two Bethnal Green wards are mainly residential areas either side of the Bethnal Green Central line station, stretching as far east as the Regent’s Canal.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Bethnal Green	Lab	Lab	Aspire	4.9	40.8	5.3	12.3	36.7
Bethnal Green West	Aspire	Aspire	Aspire	4.0	33.0	5.8	11.7	45.6
Weavers	Aspire	Lab	x	5.9	35.3	5.1	9.8	43.8

Bethnal Green’s demographic makeup is near average for Tower Hamlets: lots of socially rented housing (42 per cent), lots of Muslims (41 per cent), graduate levels a little above the London average (48 per cent). Its population, however, has increased at a much slower rate than the rest of the borough’s, reflecting the lack of opportunity for property development in this stable inner city area.

Politically, Bethnal Green has gone with the Tower Hamlets tide in the last few elections although Weavers stayed Lib Dem long after the party had faded elsewhere in the borough. Labour came out 5-3 ahead of Tower Hamlets First in 2014 and won everything in 2018, but in 2022 Aspire took the lead with five to Labour’s three. Outcomes have often been split, with councillors of different parties representing each ward.

Bow

7 seats

Bow, lying south of Victoria Park and west of Hackney Wick and the River Lea, is one of the core neighbourhoods of the East End, although the Bow Bells one tradition insists you had to be born within earshot of to be a true Cockney are in the City, not out here.

Fewer post-war council estates were built in Bow after the war than in much of the rest of the borough, meaning it has more terraced housing and more owner-occupiers than elsewhere other than St Katharine's & Wapping and Limehouse.

The two Bow wards have a higher proportion of White British residents (37–40 per cent) even than anywhere in Docklands. Bromley North is rather more like the rest of Tower Hamlets, but it is included here as it is part of

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Others
Bow East	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.7	47.2	8.5	16.3	22.3
Bow West	Lab	Green	x	4.5	37.4	4.8	29.2	24.2
Bromley North	Aspire	Aspire	x	5.6	35.6	6.1	9.9	43.9

the Stratford & Bow parliamentary constituency. In the alternative world of EastEnders, the Walford subdivision, which probably would usually vote Labour, is around here. On the fictional tube map, Walford East station is where Bromley-by-Bow station is in the real world. Bow has followed a distinctive course in local politics. It was the site of the initial Liberal Party breakthrough

in 1978 and remained with the Lib Dems until Labour, surprisingly, won in 2006. Since then, the two Bow wards (not Bromley North) have resisted the appeal of local parties. The Greens will be looking to build on having won a seat in Bow West in 2022. One of the current Independent councillors was elected for Aspire in Bromley North.

Poplar

9 seats

The housing in the four Poplar wards ranges from 42 to 47 per cent social rented, even though development has added 18,000 new residents to the area of various degrees of affluence occupying different types of housing. As with neighbouring Stepney, Poplar has a large Bangladeshi and Muslim community. Poplar ward itself is majority Muslim (54 per cent).

Though Stepney has swung back and forth, Labour won six seats out of nine in the previous Rahman peak year of 2014 (when the mayoral election was declared void). It went all-Labour in 2010 and 2018, but returned five Aspire candidates to Labour's four in 2022. Aspire will be hoping to consolidate this time.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Others
Bromley South	Lab	Aspire	x	3.6	44.6	5.2	6.0	40.6
Lansbury	Aspire	Aspire	Aspire	6.3	30.5	8.4	9.3	45.5
Mile End	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.4	43.4	6.5	9.6	35.0
Poplar	Aspire	x	x	6.1	28.2	5.5	7.1	53.1



TOWER HAMLETS

What to watch for

Tower Hamlets sometimes ploughs its own furrow in local elections. Labour had a good year in 2022, but not in Tower Hamlets where Aspire won the first non-Labour majority since the Lib Dems did it in 1990. Might there, then, be a Labour revival against the general trend? It is more likely that Rahman will win bigger.