

Waltham Forest

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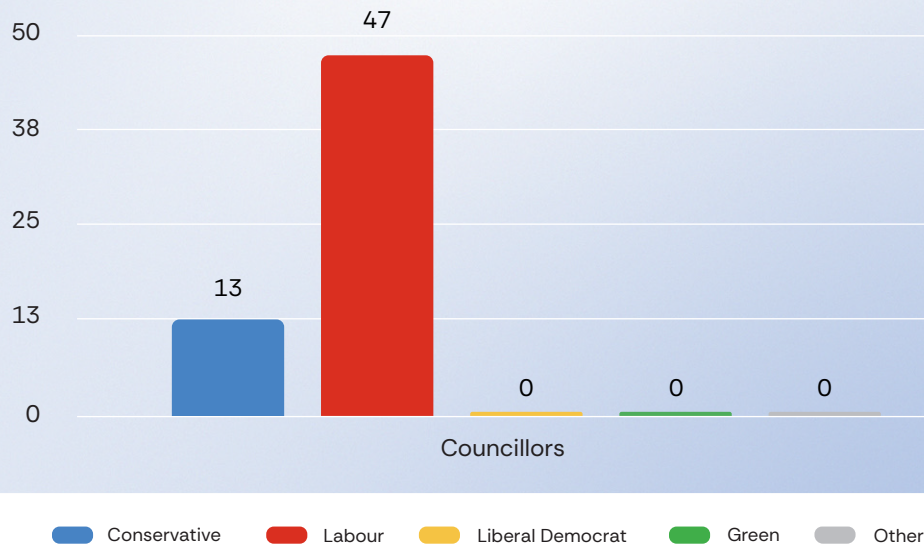
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Since 2022

Labour Defence

The elections of 2022 saw Labour put just a little more distance between itself and Conservatives. The party's 47-13 cushion was its biggest ever in the borough and was maintained at the one and only by-election to take place since.

Waltham Forest Council results May 2022 | Total seats: 60



There's been some shuffling on the benches of Waltham Forest's rightly famous modernist Town Hall, some of which might prefigure movement among the borough's voters. Three councillors who won as Tories in the same ward have joined Reform UK, the first last August, the other two in January. They represent a ward where they might now be riding the tide flowing further Right, which won't bring any comfort to the Tories.

By-elections since May 2022

26 OCTOBER 2023

HIGHAM HILL

LAB HOLD

Three councillors who won for Labour in 2022 have formed a group of Independents, but on 7 May a different entity waving an "Independents" flag could weaken Waltham Forest Labour from the Left. In addition, substantial parts of the borough could be receptive to the Greens. Waltham Forest has been an increasingly unequal Lab-Con contest since 2014. It's going to be more complicated this time.

Local landscape

Stretching from meeting points with Hackney and Newham to London's boundary with Essex, Waltham Forest is very much one of those boroughs of two halves. The split feels psychologically as well as spatially defined by the sweep of the North Circular: the part to the north has long been associated with the values as well as the physical landscapes associated with suburbia, while the rest has acquired an increasingly inner London flavour, as demographic change and gentrification have made their marks.

Recent Labour administrations have been broadly pro-development in the more urban south. New blocks of flats and bicycle lanes have proliferated, responding to and nurturing the eastward flow of young professionals for whom Hackney, like Islington before it, has become too expensive. Leyton and Leytonstone have self-satirising social media platforms, dedicated to their nascent trendiness. A new theatre has opened in Walthamstow. A branch of Gail's has arrived and thrived in Walthamstow Village. This could be rewarding territory for the Greens.

Meanwhile, the borough's north nib has largely maintained its last-century character, including politically. In a borough they are never going to win, the Conservatives have effectively been the Chingford Residents' Association. The Chingford & Woodford Green parliamentary seat has come within Labour's range, and long-term Tory incumbent Iain Duncan Smith might have been unseated in 2024, had the anti-Tory vote not been split due to a de-selected Labour candidate, Faiza Shaheen, running as an Independent.

Local landscape

At borough level, though, there hasn't been much Labour progress in these parts. The Greens aren't contesting two of the area's wards, seemingly making way for the Shaheen-backed Left Independents. Although listed simply as Independent candidates on the ballot papers, they are promoting themselves as Chingford & Woodford Green Community Independents and will probably eat into Labour's support. The real battle, though, will be between the Tories and Reform, for which Chingford looks like natural territory for Farageists.

The two-tone colouration of Waltham Forest's political map began in 2014, when the Liberal Democrat presence on the council expired. There seems little prospect of that coming back, but the Greens and Reform could give the borough's political kaleidoscope a good shake.

Waltham Forest Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	18	29	13	-	-	-
2006	15	26	19	-	-	-
2010	18	36	6	-	-	-
2014	16	44	-	-	-	-
2018	14	46	-	-	-	-
2022	13	47	-	-	-	-

 WALTHAM FOREST

Electoral prospects

Wards that contributed 38 of the council's 60 seats voted by over 50 per cent for Labour in 2022. Meanwhile, that stubborn Conservative redoubt in the north has given the Tories between 13 and 18 councillors at every election since 1986. But 2026 could see those solid past patterns dramatically disturbed.

Chingford

14 seats

Chingford, a suburban town at the far end of a branch of the Overground's Weaver Line, is one of the places where London comes abruptly to a stop. Walk north for a minute from the station and you will enter Epping Forest. This group of wards lies to the north of the North Circular Road, which carves a wide swathe at this point on its half-circuit.

Chingford has had two Conservative leaders representing it. The first was Winston Churchill from 1940 until 1945, when it was part of the former Epping constituency. The second was Iain Duncan Smith from 2001 to 2003, who still represents the current Chingford & Woodford Green constituency.

However, the place is probably most strongly associated in political memory with Norman Tebbit, the local MP from 1970 until 1992 (for the first four years as part of Epping). The most abrasive public face of Margaret Thatcher's governments, Tebbit was known as "the Chingford skinhead". The nickname was not inappropriate, and Chingford still fits the Tebbit image.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Chingford Green	Con	Con	Con	51.3	22.6	9.6	13.0	3.5
Endlebury	Con	Con	x	58.7	32.9	6.1	-	2.3
Hatch Lane & Highams Park North	Con	Con	Con	43.5	36.1	-	16.3	4.1
Larkswood	Con	Con	Con	39.4	26.9	5.7	12.1	15.9
Valley	Con	Con	Lab	49.4	45.7	5.0	-	-

Although there has been ethnic change, the three northernmost wards, Chingford Green, Endlebury and Hatch Lane & Highams Park North, are still majority White British in Census terms with pleasant, largely owner-occupied housing, much of it semi-detached. The southern wards, Larkswood and Valley, have more terraces. For an area such as this, the proportions of graduates and professionals among its residents is low. There are more of each in apparently scruffier wards in Walthamstow.

In 1998 and 2022 Labour won one of the three seats in Valley ward and came close in Hatch Lane, but it has otherwise been well behind. The Chingford & Woodford Green Community Independents will squeeze the party from the Left, while Reform will take a bite out of the resilient Right vote. Reform's trio of defectors from the Tories, who all represent Hatch Lane & Highams Park North ward. Two of them are defending their seats. Tebbit, who died shortly before the first of them changed sides, was politically similar to Farage and would probably have approved.

West Walthamstow

14 seats

“Welcome to the home of people who make and create” announces a colourful mural near Blackhorse Road station. Walthamstow is proud of its artisan traditions, of being founded as a working-class suburb and of its associations with heroes of the British Left. William Morris is even commemorated in a ward name. Walthamstow West was the constituency of Clement Attlee from 1950 to 1955.

Socially, west Walthamstow is typical of a large swathe of London – plurality white but with representation from many other ethnicities, working-class but with an admixture of people from all strata of society. If someone wants to see what London is really like, they could do worse than visit here.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
High Street	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.6	56.4	6.8	26.2	5.0
Higham Hill	Lab	Lab	Lab	4.6	59.6	8.8	21.7	5.2
Markhouse	Lab	Lab	x	8.0	71.9	13.0	-	7.0
St James	Lab	Lab	Lab	4.6	48.9	8.3	30.1	8.2
William Morris	Lab	Lab	Lab	7.0	51.7	-	27.2	7.1

The wards differ in detail – Higham Hill has the most social renters (35 per cent), Markhouse the most Muslims (36 per cent), St James the most graduates (54 per cent). High Street and St James had rapid increases in the number of professional-managerial residents between 2011 and 2021, indicating gentrification. The area is also served by the Overground’s Weaver and Suffragette lines.

Labour has not always dominated in this area. The Lib Dems were in the ascendant in Higham Hill from 1988 until 2010 and lost their last seat in High Street in 2014. The St James and William Morris wards seem obvious Green targets for 2026 and if things are very bad for Labour other wards could flip, although Labour might take comfort from its solid Higham Hill by-election hold.

East Walthamstow

12 seats

East Walthamstow is traditionally the more spacious, middle-class and suburban side of the area. Back in the day, the parliamentary constituency was sufficiently Conservative to remain so in the 1964 general election, even though Labour won a national majority.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Chapel End	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.5	52.8	7.8	25.5	5.4
Hale End & Highams Park South	Lab	Lab	x	24.5	49.0	4.0	7.9	14.7
Hoe Street	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.9	53.4	8.8	24.4	7.6
Upper Walthamstow	Lab	Lab	x	16.2	51.6	9.4	18.0	4.8
Wood Street	Lab	Lab	x	8.0	70.7	13.5	-	7.8

Its eastern edge in Hale End and Upper Walthamstow is adjacent to the southern arm of Epping Forest. Hale End & Highams Park South is north of the North Circular Road, largely in the Chingford & Woodford Green constituency and split between Chingford (E4) and Walthamstow (E17) postcodes.

However, there is now not much demographic or political difference between east and west in Walthamstow. The

Conservatives lost their last seats in Hale End in 2018. Chapel End flipped decisively from Lib Dem to Labour in 2010.

The new (as of 2022) Upper Walthamstow ward was as Tory a ward as could be created in that neighbourhood, but the party was still well adrift. The Greens are now Labour's main competitors there.

Leyton

9 seats

This is the area north of Leyton station on the Central Line, including the Lea Bridge ward which is historically part of Leyton but has been in Walthamstow constituency since 1997. Like Walthamstow, Leyton is an industrial and residential town that sprang up in Victorian times, a working-class suburb rather than the middle-class villa areas that were also growing around London at that time.

Leyton has long been a multi-ethnic community. It had a significant “immigrant” population in the 1960s and saw a right-wing backlash against it in a parliamentary by-election in 1965. But it is generally harmonious. In recent years there has been a counter trend in terms of ethnicity: Leyton and Walthamstow saw their proportions of White British residents rise between the 2011 and 2021 Censuses. In Grove Green it was up 6.4 percentage points, the largest increase in London except for two new-build wards elsewhere (Wembley Park and Stratford Olympic Park).

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Others
Grove Green	Lab	Lab	Lab	5.7	44.8	24.4	21.3	4.4
Lea Bridge	Lab	Lab	Lab	7.7	56.6	-	-	35.7
Leyton	Lab	Lab	Lab	7.6	55.6	14.7	19.5	2.7

When the Lib Dems were a force in Waltham Forest they tended to win seats patchily, often splitting ward representation with Labour and gaining and losing individual seats regardless of the overall political context. Leyton was one of their more reliable wards, but Labour swept them out in 2014.

Grove Green, easily the best ward in the borough for the Lib Dems in 2022, was not one of their stronger areas in the past, their last win being a single seat in 2002.

One of Labour’s losses to the Independents is a current councillor here.

In Lea Bridge, an Independent who scored respectably when she stood in 2022 is standing for the Green Party this time in what appears to be their top target ward.

Leytonstone

11 seats

The distinction between Leyton and Leytonstone is by no means clear, but for these purposes Leytonstone is to the south and east of Leyton proper. The section south of the Central Line, Cann Hall and Cathall, borders Newham and is the most multi-ethnic area of Waltham Forest with large black and Asian communities (although it has been becoming whiter). Both wards have around 30 per cent social housing. Forest ward, the area around Whipps Cross hospital, is Waltham Forest's most Muslim ward (36 per cent).

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Cann Hall	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.5	57.5	10.4	20.1	3.7
Cathall	Lab	Lab	x	9.1	59.0	9.3	19.0	3.6
Forest	Lab	Lab	Lab	8.0	57.1	10.6	20.5	3.9
Leytonstone	Lab	Lab	Lab	9.4	63.5	7.0	17.9	2.1

There used to be some political distinctions between these wards: the Conservatives even won Forest in 1982 and the last Lib Dem in Cann Hall lost her seat in 2014. But the results in 2022 were all uniform and all close to what one would find in most of the borough's wards

(and across large swathes of inner and middle London). A 20 per cent swing from Labour to Green leaves them close. Much more than that would see the Greens win everything. Much less and there will be a big sigh of Labour relief and probably another majority.



WALTHAM FOREST

What to watch for

With Reform taking on Tory Chingford and Highams Park and the Greens mounting a challenge in Labour Walthamstow and Leyton, the stability – or stasis – that has characterised this borough since 2010, looks certain to be shaken. Labour could hold on, but could easily end up having to make the best of No Overall Control.