

# Wandsworth

## 01

SINCE 2022 363

---

## 02

LOCAL LANDSCAPE 364

---

## 03

ELECTORAL PROSPECTS 365

---

- PUTNEY 366
- SOUTHFIELDS 367
- WANDSWORTH AND EARLSFIELD 368
- TOOTING 369
- SOUTH BATTERSEA 370
- NORTH BATTERSEA 372

## 04

WHAT TO WATCH FOR 374

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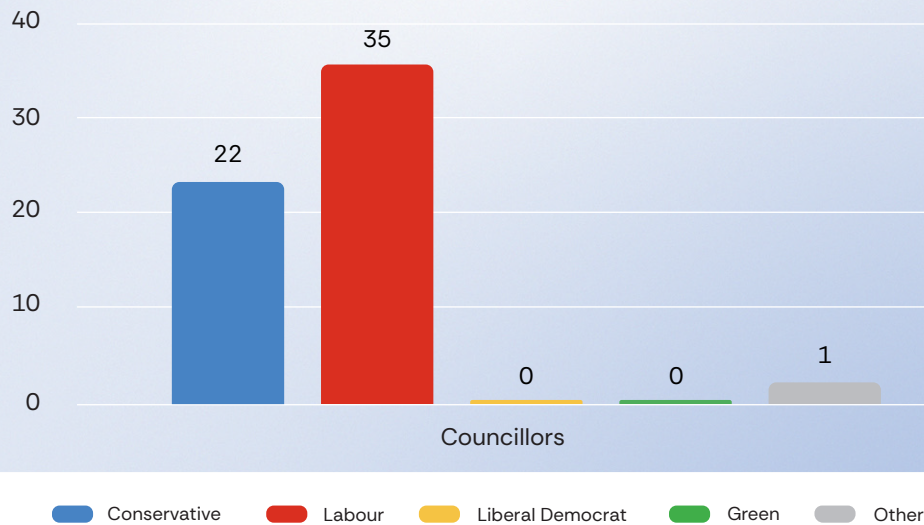
# Since 2022

## Labour Defence

One more heave got Labour over the line in 2022 to win control of Wandsworth for the first time since 1978. The party, in line with the broad city-wide trend, had been edging closer since 2010 and at last the Tory beacon was extinguished. Labour won 35 seats out of 58, the Conservatives 22 and there was one Independent winner. Gallingly for Labour, though, the heaving might soon have to begin again.

Too much should not be read into the two by-elections that have taken place, both of them in the first half of 2024. But neither should their outcomes be ignored. The first was a very solid Labour hold, but the second produced a Tory gain from Labour with a five per cent swing which, if replicated across the borough on 7 May, would be just enough to secure a Conservative council majority. And that was before the general election and the subsequent collapse of Labour's popularity nationally.

Wandsworth Council results May 2022 | Total seats: 58



By-elections since May 2022

14 JULY 2022	TOOTING BROADWAY	LAB HOLD
18 JANUARY 2024	TOOTING BROADWAY	LAB HOLD
2 MAY 2024	WEST PUTNEY	CON GAIN FROM LAB

Neither of the party groups have been entirely tranquil: the Labour group (and council) leader Simon Hogg survived an internal challenge, although in contrast to most other boroughs there have been no losses to defections. The Tories lost a member to the lure of Reform UK (with his old party saying he'd been deselected) and their 2024 by-election winner sat as an Independent for a while, although he was back in the party in time to stand as a candidate in 2026. Labour will defend its majority against a determined Conservative effort.

# Local landscape

Wandsworth became synonymous with the years of Conservative national triumph under Margaret Thatcher, privatising services, selling council houses, freezing Council Tax. The borough's long eastern border with "loony Left" Lambeth became a film set for Tory election propaganda, with voters being invited to compare and contrast. Throughout its years of domination, during which loss of control was only really threatened twice, the council has presided over huge transformations of the borough's built environment and its social mix. The Battersea of Nell Dunn's *Up The Junction*, a 1963 collection of short stories about the rough end of working-class life, has long gone. The famous power station, once as emblematic of London as The Shard is now, has been refashioned as a Thames waterfront mall.

But although Wandsworth has got much posher – gentrification was underway there long before the term became a boo-word – that has wholly worked to Tory advantage. It's been remarked that, over time, the borough's demographics have also become more aligned with Labour values and less so than with those of the Conservatives as they have championed Brexit and embraced Right-populism. High-earning, market-oriented, mildly liberal, higher-educated voters who had been happy with the party of Thatcher, Major and Cameron have been looking elsewhere. The Wandsworth Conservative brand was Thatcherite on tax and privatisation, but open to Europe and relaxed with a

Wandsworth Council elections since 2002						
Year	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP/Ref	Green	Other
2002	50	10	-	-	-	-
2006	51	9	-	-	-	-
2010	47	13	-	-	-	-
2014	41	19	-	-	-	-
2018	33	26	-	-	-	1
2022	22	35	-	-	-	1

diverse urban society. Wandsworth began to vote more in the way similar London boroughs did. Labour's long-awaited win in 2022 can be seen as the culmination of that trend.

Can it continue? As shown below, Wandsworth still looks highly marginal. Labour, under the leadership of Simon Hogg, has kept Council Tax as low as it can while talking

up bicycle lanes and demanding higher "affordable" homes percentages. An attempt to get the latter enshrined in its Local Plan displeased City Hall, which opposed it the grounds that in the present financial climate it would mean fewer such homes getting built, not more. But these are policy positions that hold appeal for voters on the Left. The Tories will surely hope that Labour's falling national stock will help their rise.

# Local landscape

Amid all this uncertainty, there is one Wandsworth councillor seeking re-election for whom victory seems assured. Malcom Grimston of West Hill ward, born in Cleethorpes and now a nuclear power advocate based at Imperial College, first won there as a Tory in 1994 and kept doing so up to and including 2014. But in October of that year, he split with his party over the future of a library then topped the poll as an Independent in 2018 with an astonishing total of over 4,000 votes. By comparison, last time was a bit of a setback – just 3,689 residents supported him, but he still finished miles ahead of the rest. His secret is assiduous attention to casework and neighbourly cultivation of a local mailing list. Maybe others ought to follow his example.

 WANDSWORTH

# Electoral prospects

There are nine Labour seats in wards where there was a split verdict in 2022 and the Tories only need a gain of eight from that starting point to get to 30, the threshold for a two-seat majority.

# Putney

12 seats

Putney, a genteel suburb, is the basis of an interesting parliamentary seat that was Labour's only gain in the 2019 general election. That result was less about demographic change than about the changing relationship between the Labour and Conservative parties and their social bases.

Roehampton is to the west of Putney proper and consists mostly of the boldly modernist public housing of the Alton Estate, constructed by the London County Council in the 1950s and early 1960s amid green space on the edge of Richmond Park. It is a distinctive ward, 43 per cent social housing, working-class and, for Wandsworth, ethnically mixed. It is also 19 per cent full-time student thanks to the local university, but still the Wandsworth ward with the smallest share of graduates (40 per cent).

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
East Putney	Con	Lab	Con	41.6	37.7	9.5	11.2	-
Roehampton	Lab	Lab	Lab	31.2	49.0	8.6	8.7	2.6
Thamesfield	Con	Con	Con	43.0	33.8	13.9	9.3	-
West Putney	Lab	Lab	Con	42.0	42.3	7.2	8.4	-

The estates helped Labour win Putney back in 1964, but the positive image of Tory Wandsworth and a bit of social engineering through the Right to Buy, meant the ward was Conservative from 1998 to 2010, then split, and all-Labour from 2014. The Labour majority in 2022 was comfortable but not overwhelming and if Reform gets anywhere in Wandsworth it will be here.

The other Putney wards were solidly Conservative from 1978 until 2022, when Labour did well to split the representation 6-6. The Conservatives regained one of their West Putney losses in the May 2024 by-election.

# Southfields

5 seats

These two wards are on either side of Southfields station which for a fortnight every summer becomes a riot of purple flowers and ribbons, and entrepreneurial locals selling drinks and hats for the Wimbledon tennis championship. Southfields ward, east of the tracks, is largely Wandsworth's section of "The Grid", an Edwardian suburb laid out in a pub-free lattice that spans the border with Wimbledon Park in Merton.

Parts of West Hill also look to Wimbledon and have SW19 postcodes. The ward also contains some council-built estates, although only 24 per cent of households are social renter. Former council properties are often let out in the private sector at much higher cost.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Southfields	Con	Con	x	43.7	40.0	7.7	8.6	-
West Hill	Ind	Lab	Con	18.5	22.7	3.3	8.2	47.2

Politically, both wards are safely Conservative in a good year for them and marginal in Labour's better ones. Labour fell only 61 votes short in Southfields in 2022, but the Left bloc vote may be split with Lib Dems and Greens this time. West Hill's marginality is somewhat disguised by the Grimston phenomenon. The Conservatives gained

a West Hill seat from Labour in 2022 by accepting that he would win and tailoring their efforts accordingly.

# Wandsworth and Earlsfield

8 seats

The name of Wandsworth is more famous as that of a borough than of a neighbourhood within it near the mouth of River Wandle, although its prison (in Wandsworth Common ward) is name-checked by Squeeze in their song Cool for Cats. Its low-lying location between East Hill and West Hill explains its industrial history, but that is fading and the large brewery in its centre has been redeveloped into the Ram Quarter.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Wandle	Lab	Lab	x	40.0	47.3	6.0	6.7	-
Wandsworth Common	Con	Con	Con	50.4	32.8	5.1	11.7	-
Wandsworth Town	Lab	Lab	Con	39.8	42.9	7.8	9.5	-

Earlsfield to its south is divided along the main railway line, Wandle ward to the north and Wandsworth Common to the south. The Henry Prince Estate, where Sadiq Khan grew up, is in Wandle but only 18 per cent of households in these wards are renting from social landlords. As with the rest of the borough, young graduate professionals account for a major part of the population.

Electorally, Labour did well here in 2022 by splitting the area 4-4 with the Conservatives. Even so, it has shifted towards the Tories over the long term. Springfield, the predecessor to Wandsworth Common, was marginal in the 1980s. Fairfield (predecessor to Wandsworth Town) was Labour until 1990 but by 2006 the Tories were winning by 37 percentage points. Labour's seats are all marginal and the party will have to fight hard to hold them.

# Tooting

13 seats

The core wards around the Broadway, plus Furzedown, are an unpretentious working-class multi-ethnic neighbourhood shading into Colliers Wood and Streatham (the Furzedown ward contains an area called Streatham Park, severed from the rest of Streatham by the new boundary in 1965). The upper two wards are influenced by Balham and share the south Battersea demographics of highly educated (70-71 per cent graduate) young professionals in rented flats. Like several other parts of London – Leyton, Brixton, Peckham – with long-established minority communities, the proportion of the White British Census category increased in the core Tooting wards between 2011 and 2021.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Furzedown	Lab	Lab	Lab	18.3	58.5	5.1	18.1	-
South Balham	Lab	Lab	x	36.6	45.7	5.5	12.2	-
Tooting Bec	Lab	Lab	Lab	23.2	57.0	6.3	13.5	-
Tooting Broadway	Lab	Lab	Lab	18.2	60.4	5.7	15.7	-
Trinity	Lab	Lab	x	38.0	44.2	8.6	9.2	-

Sadiq Khan represented the old Tooting ward on Wandsworth Council from 1994 to 2006 and then the Tooting constituency in parliament from 2005 to 2016. The lower wards were nailed down for Labour from 2010, but both Tooting and Furzedown wards elected Tories in

the 2000s, giving the party unfilled hopes that it might win the Tooting constituency. But the northern two wards remain marginal between Labour and the Conservatives, and the Greens might have some potential in the south.

# South Battersea

7 seats

The south of Battersea covers the area sometimes called “Between the Commons” – the neighbourhoods north-east of Wandsworth Common and south-west of Clapham Common. The housing consists mostly of pleasant, even elegant, terraces. It was one of the original hearths of “gentrification” in the 1970s and the process has continued to the extent that these wards are extraordinary demographic outliers.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Balham	Con	Con	Lab	43.2	39.1	6.8	10.9	-
Lavender	Con	Con	x	42.2	36.6	8.2	13.0	-
Northcote	Con	Con	x	46.5	26.1	11.5	15.9	-

These are three of the top ten wards in London for the proportion of graduates (73–75 per cent). Lavender is third in London after Hampstead Town and Belsize. Northcote has the highest proportion of the upper professions (40 per cent) after the City of London. It is the most owner-occupied ward in Wandsworth (62 per cent) and the houses tend to be single-family.

Northcote, with its wealthy residents, is safely Tory but the other two were marginal in 2022 even though the new Lavender ward was not expected to be. The politics of this area in 2026 is uncertain. Labour’s vote is likely to be eroded more by the Greens than the Tories’ is by Reform. Then again, the Conservatives may find their appeal eroding because of the national party’s direction and the local party no longer benefiting from its Wandsworth incumbency.

# North Battersea

13 seats

London has many areas with fascinating histories, but north Battersea's is one of the more intriguing. Railway lines carved up the wider Battersea area during the Victorian era, crossing at Falconbrook ward's Clapham Junction. The north side of the tracks became home to a working-class, unionised population which in 1892 elected one of its own, John Burns, to be its MP and also leaned Left in local elections.

Ward-level results (2022)	Councillors 2022			Vote share percentage 2022				
	1	2	3	Con	Lab	LD	Green	Other
Battersea Park	Lab	Lab	Lab	31.3	44.4	7.4	14.5	2.5
Falconbrook	Lab	Lab	x	25.2	69.6	-	-	5.2
Nine Elms	Con	Con	x	39.6	29.8	26.3	4.4	-
St Mary's	Lab	Lab	Con	39.1	42.4	8.1	10.5	-
Shaftesbury & Queenstown	Lab	Lab	Lab	26.6	45.7	10.7	16.9	-

The north of Battersea has been repeatedly developed and redeveloped. In 1903 the Latchmere Estate (in Battersea Park ward) was the first to be built by municipal direct labour. In the 1950s and 1960s more estates replaced dilapidated terraces, particularly north of the line into Waterloo. But in the 1970s and

1980s gentrification and the Right to Buy took root in the area, encouraged by Wandsworth's then-radical Conservatives. There is a reference in the 2003 film Love Actually to a house "at the dodgy end of Battersea" but the scene was shot in Herne Hill because by then there were no dodgy-looking terraces left.

# North Battersea

13 seats

Right to Buy was less appealing on some of the larger estates: Falconbrook is still 45 per cent social housing. Yet during this century, Battersea has changed again, with ever more lavish developments creating a high-rise riverside landscape in St Mary's and Nine Elms wards.

Nine Elms is almost entirely the creation of redevelopment in the past decade, which continues at pace in the vicinity of Battersea Power Station and is served by the Northern Line extension. In 2022, the ward's first local election took place before most of the electorate had arrived. As a consequence, the two Tory winners polled just 352 and 328 votes (one of them became the defector to Reform). The ward will have bulked out a bit by now, mostly with wealthy residents.

The Conservatives gained the Battersea parliamentary seat in 1987, but it was not until 1990 that the wards (except Latchmere, precursor to Falconbrook) flipped at council level. North Battersea got safer and safer, even though Labour held the parliamentary seat from 1997 until 2010, and the Tories got within 16 votes of a seat in Latchmere in 2006. Labour's comeback began in 2014 and continued into 2022 with solid majorities in Battersea Park and Shaftesbury & Queenstown and two seats in St Mary's despite adverse boundary revisions.

Throughout more than half a century of change, there has been one constant factor. Battersea Park Labour councillor Tony Belton was first elected to the council in 1971 and has led the Labour opposition for two stretches. He will be standing again in 2026.



WANDSWORTH

## What to watch for

General trends suggest Wandsworth should produce one of Labour's less bad results. The continuation of the Conservatives' low Council Tax policy, coupled with a leftward tilt on housing and services, might be popular with a discerning electorate. At national level the Tories show no sign of changing direction to make Wandsworthians like them again. Yet the Conservatives' path to victory does not look difficult in a borough where Reform will take fewer votes from them than the Greens seem likely to take from Labour.