

Date: 30th July 2025

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
Home Secretary
The Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF
By email: homesecretary@homeoffice.gov.uk

Dear Home Secretary,

We are writing jointly, as the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex, Leaders of Epping Forest District Council, Essex County Council, Alex Burghart MP and Dr Neil Hudson MP, to request an urgent meeting to discuss the continued use of hotels within the Epping Forest District to house newly arrived asylum seekers.

You will be aware that both The Bell Hotel in Epping and the Phoenix Hotel in North Weald are currently being used for this purpose. From the fires at the Phoenix Hotel near North Weald (Brentwood and Ongar Constituency) and the Bell Hotel in Epping (Epping Forest Constituency) a few weeks ago, leading to a man being charged with alleged arson, and now the alleged sexual assaults in Epping by an asylum seeker resident of the Bell Hotel this month, including on a school-aged girl, our local communities are becoming increasingly distressed. These sites are proving to be entirely unsuitable and are placing an unsustainable strain on police resources, creating significant community tension, and leading to public disorder that is unacceptable to our residents and deeply concerning for the safety of all involved.

Despite strong objections from Epping Forest District Council, the decision to reopen The Bell Hotel in April 2025 was taken by the Home Office. Indeed, Cllr Chris Whitbread is clear that this hotel does not meet the basic requirements we believe to be necessary.

On Tuesday 8th July, Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu, a resident of The Bell Hotel, was charged with multiple serious offences, including alleged sexual assault and harassment. This led to large-scale protests and counter-protests on 17th, 20th, 23rd and 27th July, with more than 2,000 people attending across all dates. The Section 60AA order banning face coverings has had to be used repeatedly to manage public safety at these events. Protesters and counter-protesters are being kept just metres apart.

During these events, eight Essex Police officers have been injured—one requiring hospitalisation after being struck in the face with a bottle. Officers from neighbouring forces have been brought in to support our local resources. This simply cannot continue.

While we respect the public's right to peaceful protest, the level of violence now seen on Epping's streets is alarming. To date, 23 people have been arrested and 14 have been charged.

Essex has worked hard over recent years to reduce crime:

- Anti-social behaviour has dropped by two-thirds since 2016.
- Knife crime has fallen by 24% since 2019.

- In Epping Forest specifically, all crime is down by 7.9%, and ASB by 13.2% in the last 12 months to June 2025.

We are determined to continue that progress, but these deployments are putting our ability to maintain public safety at risk.

We support the Home Office's wider objective of reducing reliance on hotels and are keen to work with you. However, we urge you to accelerate this process and make The Bell Hotel in Epping a priority for urgent closure.

It is vital that this location be reconsidered considering the operational realities on the ground. We urge that The Bell Hotel be made a priority for urgent decommissioning.

The public's trust, our community's cohesion, and the operational integrity of Essex Police depend on it.

We would be grateful if you would meet with us to discuss this matter further. In our roles, we remain committed to maintaining public safety and community cohesion.

We are aligned in our commitment to the safety and wellbeing of the people of Epping and Essex, and we hope for your urgent support in resolving this situation.

Accordingly, we would welcome a meeting with you and the Minister for Asylum and Immigration, to engage constructively on the future use of these sites and identify sustainable, community-sensitive solutions moving forward.

Yours sincerely,



Roger Hirst
Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex



Cllr Chris Whitbread
Leader, Epping Forest District Council



Dr Neil Hudson MP (Epping Forest)



Cllr Kevin Bentley
Leader, Essex County Council



Alex Burghart MP (Brentwood and Ongar)