

[Stored with zero-access encryption](#)

FreedomOfInformation@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Freedom of Information Request – Response

Dear Andrew,

Freedom of Information Request Ref: 4537

I refer to your recent request for information relating to the recent protest events in Epping.

Our Communications team have compiled the following statement which will be shared with all requesters in reference to these events.

Epping Protests and Bell Hotel Freedom of Information Request

Thank you for your enquiry regarding the use of the Bell and/or Phoenix Hotels within the district of Epping Forest.

The Home Office is responsible for all asylum seeker hotel accommodation provided within the district. Epping Forest District Council has consistently voiced its concerns and issued its first statement when it became aware of a placement at the Phoenix Hotel in October 2022.

Please direct any enquiries regarding the management or occupation of the Bell and Phoenix hotels direct to the Home Office:

- public.enquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk

Please direct all policing matters to Essex Police Service or the office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex.

Council Statement – Phoenix Hotel 23 October 2022

The Home Office has acted independently on this. There was no consultation with the District Council or other partners. The news came as a surprise to us last week and we do have a number of significant concerns about this location, indeed we have previously objected to a facility on this site.”

The Phoenix is an inappropriate location for a number of reasons, including the fact it is on a busy road, in an isolated location where it is difficult to access shops and public transport. Local services such as health and schools are already have high levels of demand and pressure on them.

We are seeking further clarification from the Home Office about their intended use for this facility moving forward and will put continued pressure on them to reverse this decision.

In relation to recent events

Despite the continued objections of Epping Forest District Council, the Phoenix has continued to operate throughout the intervening period with a brief interruption following the fire in 2025. The Bell was subsequently added to provision by the Home Office. Responding to the recent Phoenix fire and reactivation of the Bell, the Council said:

Council Statement Phoenix Fire and Bell Reactivation 1 April 2025

Councillor thanks emergency services

A leading councillor has thanked members of the emergency services who attended a serious fire at the Phoenix Hotel in North Weald on Friday night.

The Home Office operated hotel was being used as a temporary accommodation centre for people seeking asylum.

Councillor Chris Whitbread, Leader of Epping Forest District Council said: "I want to express our gratitude to the men and women of the emergency services for their skill and professionalism. A hotel fire is a daunting scenario, but I am sure the Firefighters of Essex Fire and Rescue, supported by the police and health services will have displayed the utmost skill, bravery and professionalism. Thankfully, we understand that everyone at the hotel has been accounted for."

Information on the cause of the fire is limited. Councillor Whitbread added: "No doubt Essex Fire and Rescue will be able to shed light on the cause in due course. Until then we should not speculate."

Separately, the Home Office has plans to reactivate temporary accommodation previously used for people seeking asylum. Administration of the accommodation is being handled by a private company working directly for the Home Office.

A spokesperson for Epping Forest District Council said: "We have been informed but we have no authority over the placement of asylum seekers or management at the accommodation in our district. However, we have expressed our concerns for the health and wellbeing of people placed in unsuitable accommodation which lacks the necessary social, medical and transport infrastructure. We have not been given timescales but appeal to the Home Office to act quickly in finding more suitable accommodation as soon as possible."

All enquiries related to people evacuated from the Phoenix or relocated to the Bell – these are questions for the Home Office – contact at public.enquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk

The Bell Hotel in Epping was the second asylum seeker hotel to be activated by the Home Office within the District. The District Council raised objections with the Home Office and its agents regarding the location and availability of services at every opportunity. The Council was therefore pleased when the Home Office took the decision to close the Bell Hotel in 2024. It was therefore with considerable disappointment that the council learnt of the Home Office intention to reopen the Bell earlier this year.

Full Council 8 April 2025

A further smaller fire occurred at the Bell following the transfer of people from the Phoenix. On 8 April the Leader of Council updated the meeting of Full Council as follows:

We have consistently raised our objections since the Home Office moved the very first asylum seekers into local hotels. While the fires at the Phoenix and The Bell have focused public attention, we have always argued that these hotels are unsuitable for other fundamental reasons. Refugees or asylum seekers from beyond our shores require complex and comprehensive support measures.

For whatever reason, the Home Office appeared to partially listen to reason when it previously closed The Bell. The decision to reopen it is therefore very disappointing indeed.

I want to make clear to all councillors and residents, that the decision to reopen The Bell was taken by the Home Office over our objections. It simply does not meet the basic requirements we believe to be necessary.

Council Position 9 July

Following an arrest for alleged sexual assault in Epping, the Leader of Council wrote to the Home Secretary and published a further statement:

The events that took place in Epping on Tuesday are both deeply disturbing and extremely concerning. I want to thank Essex Police for their rapid and effective response, and I commend the local residents whose quick thinking helped ensure the swift arrest of the suspect.

Let me be absolutely clear. Epping Forest District Council has consistently and repeatedly opposed the use of the Bell Hotel to accommodate asylum seekers. From the outset, we warned the Home Office that this site is entirely inappropriate. Placing vulnerable individuals from a wide range of cultural backgrounds into an unsupervised setting, in the centre of a small town, without the proper infrastructure, support or services, is both reckless and unacceptable. It puts pressure on local services, causes understandable concern for residents, and is unfair on those placed in the hotel.

The Home Office must now face the reality of the situation. The Bell Hotel must be closed without delay. Our warnings have been ignored for too long.

Epping is a strong, compassionate and united community. While police have confirmed there is no ongoing threat, residents should be reassured that additional police patrols and active monitoring of the High Street and nearby areas are already in place to ensure public safety.

I urge everyone to rely solely on official updates from the police and the council. Avoid speculation or misinformation being spread on social media or elsewhere. We will remain calm and united, and we will work to ensure Epping remains a safe place for everyone.

The Leader of Council wrote to the Home Secretary Letter to the Home Secretary:

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP

Home Secretary
The Home Office
2 Marsham Street,
London,
SW1P 4DF
10 July 2025

Dear Home Secretary,

I have issued a statement calling for the immediate closure of two local hotels used by the Home Office to accommodate asylum seekers in Epping Forest.

These calls followed the latest in a series of incidents that have left our local community in a state of fear and distrust. In the most recent incident Essex Police arrested an asylum seeker on suspicion of three counts of sexual assault, one count of inciting a girl to engage in sexual activity, and one count of harassment without violence in broad daylight in Epping High Street. This follows two earlier incidents of arson in which one asylum seeker hotel, the Phoenix in North Weald was partially destroyed. The Home Office then rehoused the suspect in the Bell Hotel, which they also subsequently attempted to burn down.

We have to be grateful that thanks in large part to the professionalism and bravery of the Essex Fire and Rescue Services no lives were lost. We also have to be thankful for the quick reactions of local residents and swift actions of Essex Police in the rapid apprehension of the suspect in the sexual assault.

These are not isolated incidents.

Epping Forest District Council has consistently and repeatedly opposed the use of the Bell and Phoenix hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. From the outset, we warned the Home Office that these sites are entirely inappropriate. Placing vulnerable individuals from a wide range of cultural backgrounds into an unsupervised setting, in the centre of a small town, without the proper infrastructure, support or services, is both reckless and unacceptable. It puts pressure on local services, causes understandable concern for residents, and is unfair on those placed in the hotel.

Events in other parts of the Country have taught us that we ignore such warnings at our peril. Failure to act plays directly into the hands of extremists. Utilising social media, they have become adept at twisting the legitimate concerns of local people to their own advantage. The failure of the Home Office to address the issue of asylum seeker hotels only makes the situation worse.

The Home Office must now face the reality of the situation. Our warnings have been ignored for too long . The Bell Hotel must be closed without delay.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Chris Whitbread

Leader of Epping Forest District Council Following a Full Council motion on 24 July calling for the immediate closure of the Bell Hotel and the rapid closure of the Phoenix Hotel supported unanimously by all councillors, the Leader of Council wrote again to the Home Secretary:

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP

Home Secretary

The Home Office

2 Marsham Street,

London,

SW1P 4DF

25 July 2025

Dear Home Secretary,

I wrote to you on 10 July 2025 requesting the immediate closure of two local hotels used by the Home Office to accommodate asylum seekers in Epping Forest. I have yet to receive a formal response to this letter.

Since then, you will be aware of the multiple demonstrations that have taken place in Epping by concerned but peaceful residents and the completely unacceptable violence that has accompanied this, in part, perpetrated and engineered by groups on the political extremes.

We forewarned of the potential unrest that might follow anything other than immediate action, and I deeply regret that this has been proven true.

Last night, in exceptional circumstances and amidst a large protest outside, the Full Council of Epping Forest District Council unanimously agreed that I should write to you again, demanding the following:

1. The immediate and permanent closure of the Bell Hotel as asylum accommodation.
2. The managed closure of the Phoenix Hotel, [Bobbingworth], ensuring the safe transition of families, with due regard to safeguarding responsibilities.
3. Home Office and relevant Government Ministers to:
 - o Cease the use of unsuitable hotels in small towns and rural areas for asylum accommodation.
 - o Properly consult with local authorities before placing individuals in their area.
 - o Take urgent action to prevent further risks to public safety and rising community tensions.

The Town of Epping feels besieged right now and the Government's promises to close all Hotels by the end of the Parliament does nothing to address their legitimate concerns.

We have consistently called for the closure of these facilities on the grounds they are unsuitable for the occupants' needs, and we now add the issue of their safety and the safety concerns of our residents as reasons for closure.

The residents of Epping are both moderate, inclusive and tolerant, but deeply concerned following events in the Town and confidence cannot be rebuilt and tension eased until the Bell Hotel is closed.

On behalf of our residents and in the strongest possible terms, we urge you to hear the united voice of Epping Forest District Council and take immediate action to close the Bell Hotel, Epping followed by the managed closure of the Phoenix Hotel.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Chris Whitbread

Leader of Epping Forest District Council Despite the Council's opposition to the use of local hotels for asylum seekers, and its support for peaceful demonstrations, the Council utterly condemns the violence that has afflicted Epping in recent weeks. Working with Essex Police and other responsible agencies, the Council has also sought to counter the wide-spread mis and disinformation, particularly on social media designed to inflame tension and provoke violence.

For reliable information, please refer to a range of other statements available to the public through the Epping Forest District Council website and social media channels.

- www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk

You can also watch recordings of all public council meetings at which references to asylum accommodation has been discussed and debated:

- Watch a meeting - Epping Forest District Council

Councillors remain united in their commitment to representing the interests of Epping and the wider community of Epping Forest. Please continue to follow our latest news releases online. You can also subscribe for email updates at:

- Sign up for email updates

The information supplied to you continues to be protected by copyright. You are free to use it for your own purposes, including for private study and non-commercial research, and for any other purpose authorised by an exception in current copyright law. Documents (except photographs) can be also used in the UK without requiring permission for the purposes of news reporting. Any other reuse, for example commercial publication, would require the permission of the copyright holder.

If you are dissatisfied with the handling of your Freedom of Information request, you have the right to ask for an internal review. Internal review requests should be submitted within two months of the date of your receipt of this response to your request and should be addressed to: Lynne Ridley, Corporate and Data Protection Officer, Epping Forest District Council, Civic Offices, Epping, Essex, CM16 4BZ or dataprotectionofficer@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Please quote the reference number above in any further communication concerning your Freedom of Information request.

Yours faithfully,

Freedom of Information Officer

Epping Forest District Council

Civic Offices,
High Street,
Epping,
Essex, CM16 4BZ

(01992) 564000

-----Original Message-----

From: Freedom of Information <FreedomOfInformation@eppingforestdc.gov.uk>

Sent: 22 July 2025 13:09

To: Just an Ordinary Citizen <request-1313543-46ed8dd2@whatdotheyknow.com>

Subject: FOI 4531 - Bell Hotel Protest Coordination and Risk Management :
Acknowledgement

Freedom of Information Request – Acknowledgement

Dear Adam Smith,

Freedom of Information Request Ref: 4531

I refer to your recent request for information relating to the recent protest events in Epping, which was received by the Council on the 21st of July 2025.

Your request is being dealt with in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and will be responded to within twenty working days of the date of its receipt by the Council.

If you have any queries about your Freedom of Information request, do not hesitate to contact me. Please quote the reference number above in any further communication concerning your request.

Yours faithfully,

Freedom of Information Officer

Epping Forest District Council

Civic Offices,

High Street,

Epping,

Essex, CM16 4BZ

(01992) 564000