

Tensions in Epping: Community Frustrations Mount Over Asylum Hotel

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— Categories: Human Rights



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Protests erupted again in Epping, Essex, over the weekend, drawing national attention to the town's growing discontent with the use of local hotels to house asylum seekers. While signs and chants from demonstrators echoed anger over immigration and public safety, many residents expressed deeper frustrations about fairness, local priorities, and government leadership, adding layers of complexity to the unrest.

At the centre of recent demonstrations is The Bell Hotel, which has been accommodating asylum seekers for several weeks. Tensions escalated after an Ethiopian man residing there was charged with multiple offences, including sexual assault, harassment, and inciting a minor to engage in sexual activity. The accused denies the allegations. The incident sparked public outrage, with the latest protest on Sunday, July 27, drawing an estimated 500 demonstrators and up to 700 counter-protestors. Despite the potential for confrontation, Essex Police reported that order was maintained throughout the day, with three arrests made, including one tied to a previous protest.

Residents voiced growing concern over what they see as an imbalance in public support. Caroline Donohue, who works at the Cancer Research UK shop on High Road, noted that many residents feel overlooked while asylum seekers are given accommodations ahead of locals on long housing waiting lists. “No one wants the immigrants in the hotels,” she said, adding that financial pressures are exacerbating public resentment. Donohue said she understood the protests, and although she hadn’t attended, she admitted she might have if she hadn’t been working.

Her sentiment is echoed across town, where some small business owners and workers expressed anxiety about repeated protests. Shops closed early, citing safety concerns. Among them was Adeeb Mohammed, a Romford resident working in a phone store near the protest site. Mohammed, an immigrant from Hong Kong of Pakistani heritage, emphasised the importance of legal immigration, stating, “Obviously, I’m an immigrant as well, but I came the legal way.”

Mohammed and others pointed to the broader issue of local democracy. He supported the recent decision by Epping Forest District Council, which voted to ask the government to close the asylum hotel. “The locals know best what’s happening in their area,” he said, advocating for community input in decisions that directly affect residents’ quality of life.

While counter-protestors from groups such as Stand Up to Racism accused right-wing groups of exploiting the situation to incite division, many local voices maintained that their concerns were not about race or nationality but about fairness, public safety, and government accountability. Activist Sabby Dhalu accused demonstrators of “stirring up racism and violence,” yet others insisted the debate was more nuanced.

For many in Epping, this unrest is not merely about immigration policy but about how national decisions impact everyday lives at the local level. As economic strain continues

and services feel stretched, the response in Epping suggests that residents across the country may increasingly demand a greater say in how their communities are managed, particularly when it comes to issues as personal as housing, safety, and immigration.