

British Hotels have become a flashpoint for furious immigration debate

The Bell Hotel in Epping, just outside of London, gets no new bookings, yet is full every night. That's because, since 2020, it has been used by the government to help house the thousands of asylum seekers who arrive each year on England's southern coast and become trapped in administrative limbo.

Save the hoteliers, no one is happy with the current system: Not the government and local councils, who have to stump up huge sums to pay the lucrative contracts; not the asylum seekers, who can spend years living in a small room waiting to learn if they can stay in Britain; and, more recently in the case of the Epping hotel, not local residents, some of whom say they feel unsafe with the groups of young men living in town.

From time to time, these grievances boil over. In Epping, the flashpoint came last month after an asylum seeker from Ethiopia was charged with sexually assaulting a schoolgirl in the local high street. He has been charged with other offenses and is awaiting trial. He denies the allegations. Many residents were incensed. Some held protests outside the hotel – fueled by those on the hard-right – which turned violent.

But the protesters were given something to cheer on Tuesday, when the council won a landmark High Court ruling that will block the owners of the Bell Hotel from housing asylum seekers, after the council complained that the hotel was not being used for its intended purpose. The 138 people living there will have to be removed next month.

This could cause a huge headache for the Labour government. Where these asylum seekers will go next poses the thorniest of problems for Prime Minister Keir Starmer. But for Nigel Farage, the firebrand leader of the hard-right Reform UK party, the ruling was a cause for celebration.

If councils across the UK choose to take similar legal action, that could create a major problem for the government, which has a legal obligation to provide accommodation for asylum seekers while their claims are being processed. In the UK, some 210 hotels are being used to house around 32,000 people. If other councils win rulings like Epping, the government could within months have to find other places to house them while their claims crawl through the system.

At first, things were “normal,” he said. While the locals would play cricket, he would play soccer with others staying in the hotel. “We’d go out. Nobody cared,” he said.

(...) Recent policies, such as a “one-in-one-out” deal with France, cannot solve the central problem: Thousands of people each year are still willing to risk their lives to travel across the Channel. Frustration with high levels of immigration, coupled with discontent over Britain's sluggish economic growth, has provided fertile ground for nativism.

The Home Office announced Friday it will appeal the court's ruling, saying the government is committed to closing all asylum hotels by 2029, but that it wants this to be done in a “managed and orderly manner.”

Christian Edwards, CNN 22 August 2025