DEMOS

LOCATION REPORT: EPPING FOREST

MAPPING INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAINS AROUND LOCAL ASYLUM HOTEL CONFLICTS IN ONE LOCAL AUTHORITY

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NOVEMBER 2026

PART OF THE *FILL THE VOID* SERIES

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Published by Demos November 2026
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the local residents, community leaders, faith leaders, journalists, politicians, civil servants, and civil society members of Epping Forest who have generously shared their perspectives, experiences and expertise with us as well as their feedback on our recommendations.

Thank you also to More in Common and 411 for their support on the focus group recruitment and moderation and the online analysis portions of this research, respectively. Demos is grateful to Quadrature Charitable Foundation for their support of this programme.

Any errors remain the authors' responsibility.

Sofia Lyall

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is the UK's leading cross-party think tank producing research and policies that have been adopted by successive governments for more than 30 years. Our vision is for an upgraded democracy, to rebuild the broken relationships between institutions and citizens, and between citizens. Resilient information ecosystems are a vital enabler of this more trusted democracy.

This research is part of Demos Digital's Epistemic Security programme that focuses on securing the UK's information supply chains and building democratic resilience to adverse influences. This research programme is designed to ground our policy development and programme design into the lives and pain points of everyday people at the local level. Understanding how information is produced, distributed and evaluated within local communities is vital to supporting our understanding of the national information environment - not only because the local make up the national, but because it so clearly informs UK citizens' every-day lives and outlook on the country more broadly.

This report is published together with a comparative report, *Fill the Void*, and a further two dedicated location-specific reports for Greater Manchester and Dudley.

These studies are informing the design of a series of further pilots that will be launched in 2027 in partnership with local community actors to trial the policy and programmatic approaches proposed in this paper. If you are interested in partnering on future work in local areas please contact: Demos Digital Director, *hannah.perry@demos.co.uk*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

People need trustworthy local information to understand their lives, their communities and the democracy they are part of. Across the UK the information supply chain is breaking down, leaving friendships and communities at risk. Using mixed methods, this study diagnoses what is actually happening at a local level when information infrastructure breaks-down and misinformation intersects with real world conflicts. It takes the example of specific local clashes over the 'asylum hotel' policy and maps citizens' experiences in the local information supply chain that contributed to them.

This paper focuses on the local information infrastructure of Epping Forest specifically. It is one of three local studies conducted alongside Dudley and Greater Manchester. It should therefore be read alongside the comparative report, Fill the Void, which reflects our triangulated findings and full set of recommendations. In Epping Forest, our fieldwork included:[1] 5 focus groups with 44 residents in February 2026, reflecting key demographic and political attitudes criteria using More In Common's Seven Segments, plus pre and post discussion surveys; 10 follow-up resident interviews; 7 local stakeholder interviews; and analysis of local social media channels.[2]

Epping Forest is a district that became a national flashpoint for asylum hotel protests in 2025. Its local information supply chain has been weakened by declining local journalism, low trust in national news media and political institutions, and limited engagement from councils and elected representatives. Residents increasingly rely on Facebook groups and local online influencers for information, despite concerns about misinformation, inconsistent moderation, and inflammatory content about asylum accommodation. Many feel fed up with a story about their town that they can't control and an information supply that seems to support inaccurate and hateful information that fuels community tensions.

> *"No one knows the truth anymore because there's so many different variations of actually what's gone on. I've got no idea. And also I don't know who to trust."*
> ***(Chris, Established Liberal, 54)***

1 For full details of the methodology see the companion comparative report, Fill the Void.
2 More in Common. 7 Segments. See appendix. Available here: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments/

KEY FINDINGS

This report highlights how Epping Forest - and the Bell Hotel - became a flashpoint for national asylum hotel protests and local division in the summer of 2025 and how vulnerabilities in the local information supply chain exacerbated what was and continues to be a source of tension:

- **LARGE PROTESTS OUTSIDE THE BELL HOTEL LEFT MANY EPPING TOWN RESIDENTS FEARING FOR THEIR SAFETY.**

  With reports of racially motivated assaults, abuse, online harassment and property damage, many residents - particularly those from minoritised ethnic communities - felt extremely unsafe. Others felt discomfort about Epping becoming a national news story that they felt did not represent their community.

- **DURING THE RIOTS, THE FALSE CLAIMS ABOUT LOCAL ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION SPURRED COMMUNITY TENSIONS.**

  Inaccurate information about the Bell Hotel and asylum seekers in the district circulated through Epping Forest's information networks, including claims that asylum seekers were trespassing on school grounds, and hateful and inflammatory statements from online content creators. Many residents felt vulnerable and frustrated.

- **THE COUNCIL'S COMMUNICATION STRUGGLED TO REACH RESIDENTS.**

  There was relatively little information from councils and councillors and low levels of public engagement with any that did come out. The council's online reach in and of itself is a challenge - their respective follower counts are significantly lower (below 10k) than the largest community Facebook group (37k followers), and only a small fraction of the overall population (137k).

- **PEOPLE IN EPPING ARE ALSO WITHOUT TRUSTED LOCAL REPORTING AS EPPING FOREST HAS BECOME A LOCAL NEWS "DRYLAND".**

  The decline of pluralistic local journalism has left the Newsquest-owned Epping Forest Guardian as the district's sole local news outlet. Its low readership and trust among residents means many herald for the days when truly local reporters could be on the street covering stories that matter to local people.

- **TRADITIONAL INFORMATION PILLARS - NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA, POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENT - ARE FACING A CRISIS OF TRUST.**

  Most residents viewed mainstream media as biased and low quality. Only a small minority valued it as accurate, fact-based information. The BBC drew particular criticism, but trust with other national outlets wasn't much better. GB News was a trusted alternative for some, but many go without national news altogether.

  Anti-elite sentiment and a dislike for political agendas also means few residents see government and representatives as trusted information sources.

- **IN THE VOID LEFT BY TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS, FACEBOOK HAS BECOME A PRIMARY SOURCE OF LOCAL INFORMATION FOR RESIDENTS.**

  Some appreciated the speed and community-based production of information on these channels. Others shared concerns about misinformation, particularly about asylum accommodation. While some local Facebook group admins actively moderated harmful content, this was inconsistent and dependent on volunteer efforts.

- **LOCAL INFLUENCERS HAVE BECOME INFLUENTIAL, BUT HIGHLY CONTESTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION.**

  Adam Brooks - named unprompted across all focus groups - is one of the most prominent voices on asylum hotels in Epping Forest's online information ecosystem. Many residents trusted him because of his local roots and perceived authenticity. Others viewed his reporting as hateful, factually inaccurate, and inflammatory.

In the next phase of this work, Demos will design pilots to support the local information ecosystem informed by these insights. If you are interested in partnering in the local area please contact **Hannah Perry**, Director of Demos Digital: ***hannah.perry@demos.co.uk***

SECTION 1
INTRODUCTION

Local information supply chains are vital to the UK's democracy. The platforms, individuals, and sources people lean on to understand events in their community are the foundations for an informed and active citizenry. Demos uses 'the information supply chain' as a way of understanding the elements that make up information infrastructure - they are the production, distribution, acquisition and evaluation of information, and how that informs decision-making and the actions people subsequently take.

Across the country - from Southport, to Southampton, and Belfast - there have been an increasing number of incidents where information supply chain failure has exacerbated real world tensions and left communities feeling unsafe. There has never been a more important time to understand the vulnerabilities of the nation's local information infrastructure and to identify how it can better serve local people and a healthy and resilient democracy.

Epping Forest is one of three locations where this study was conducted, to understand vulnerabilities in local information supply chains and their contribution to community tensions. This is demonstrated by evidencing, through the lens of local citizens, stakeholders, social media analysis and desk research, how the local information environment performed in relation to the "asylum hotel" policy. This case study has been chosen not in order to examine that policy itself, but because immigration has become the dividing issue of our time, and this policy is one that plays out on a street by street level meaning the local information supply chain matters more than ever.[3]

ABOUT EPPING FOREST

Epping Forest is a district on the north-eastern outskirts of London, with approximately 137,000 residents. At the heart is Epping town - the last stop on the London Tube's Central Line - which is surrounded by extensive woodland and a series of small villages in the Essex countryside.



The district is characterised by a mix of affluent communities and pockets of significant deprivation. Some areas have been described as a "celebrities' paradise" because of the luxury properties and celebrity residents.[4] There are, however, a number of wards in Epping Forest where the percentage of children living in low income families is significantly higher than the national average (17.1%) – such as in Loughton Roding.[5,6] Epping Forest has a relatively older age profile

3 For more information on the methodology and policy context see the parallel report, Fill the Void, Appendix 2.
4 Nicole Cherruault. 'RICH & FAMOUS. We live in 'celebrities' paradise' where homes sell for £15MILLION… we bump into TV stars & sport legends on high street'. Available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/money/31573783/house-rich-epping-big-home-chigwell-forest/
5 Herts and West Essex Integrated Care Board (2025) 'Neighbourhood Pack 2025: Epping Forest North PCN'. Available at: https://www.hertsandwestessex.ics.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Neighbourhood-Pack-2025-Epping-Forest-North-PCN-July-25.pdf
6 In Loughton Roding, 31% of children live in income-deprived families, in Waltham Abbey North and Grange Hill, it's 26%. The average in Epping Forest is 12.4%.

than England as a whole and with over 8 in 10 residents (84%) identifying as "White".

Epping Forest has historically been a Conservative stronghold (including, Epping Town Council, Epping Forest District Council and Essex County Council), but local election results in May 2026 suggest that large parts of the electorate in Epping Forest have been turning towards Reform. Conservative MP Dr Neil Hudson appears to be maintaining overall popularity in polling from May 2026.[7] However, the May 2026 local elections marked a significant shift. Reform UK's victory at Essex County Council ended 25 years of Conservative control, while the Conservatives lost their overall majority on Epping Forest District Council, where Reform secured 22% of seats. At a ward level, Reform UK won some of their highest voter shares across the entire country.[8]

A FLASHPOINT IN THE UK'S ASYLUM HOTEL PROTESTS

From July 2025, Epping town became known as the "epicentre of Britain's anti-migrant protests" (Epping Forest District Councillor). Following two sexual assault incidents committed by an asylum seeker housed in the local Bell Hotel, ongoing local protests took place against the Home Office policy to use hotels as contingency accommodation for asylum-seekers.[9] These protests started small, but soon snowballed into much larger demonstrations amassing thousands throughout July, August, and September.[10] The demonstrations repeatedly descended into violence – with bottles and flares thrown at police, public property damaged, and police and hotel workers assaulted. By mid-September, 32 people had been arrested in relation to the protests, with offences including violent disorder, criminal damage, and assault.[11]

Multiple local residents shared theories that many anti-migrant protestors had travelled from outside the area to take part in the protests - this was echoed in focus groups run for this research.[12] The protests also attracted members of far-right groups including Britain First, the Homeland Party and White Vanguard, several of whom have been banned or flagged by authorities across Europe for promoting violent extremism.[13]

Counter-protests also took place, including one attended by an estimated 2,000 people on 27 July 2025. An earlier counter-protest was forced to retreat by anti-migrant demonstrators, prompting allegations, including from Reform leader Nigel Farage, that police had deliberately bussed in counter-protesters.[14] Essex Police rejected these claims as "categorically wrong", stating that officers had moved counter-protesters to safety after they were surrounded by hostile demonstrators.[15]

The protests triggered a legal battle between Epping Forest District Council and the hotel owners - Somani Hotels Limited - to end the use of the hotel for asylum accommodation.

7 Epping Forest has been a Conservative constituency since 1974. Hudson MP held the seat at the 2024 general election (43% vote share). In May 2026, 39.6% of the local population said they would still vote for him. See: https://pollingreport.uk/seats/E14001226?model=uniform

8 Ongar was won by Reform with 57.3% of the vote, Waltham Abbey North with 52.8%, and Epping Rural East with 51%. See: Epping Forest District Council (2026) 'Election results roundup'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/election-results-roundup/

9 On 10 July 2025, a resident at the Bell Hotel was arrested and charged with sexually assaulting a teenage girl and a woman in Epping. On 4 September, he was found guilty of two counts of sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, attempt to incite sexual activity, and harassment. He was sentenced to 12 months in prison and later deported.

10 The first protest on 11 July was attended by 200 people. See: https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/R-v-Williams-Smith-and-Peagram.pdf

11 Lewis Adam (2025) 'Men accused of asylum hotel violence to face trial'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62z5dy179yo ; Essex Police. (2026) 'Epping: Two more men jailed for violent disorder following 2025 protests'. Available at: https://www.essex.police.uk/news/essex/news/news/2026/august/epping-two-more-men-jailed-for-violent-disorder/ ; Essex Police. (2026) 'Epping: Man in court charged with racially abusing officer'. Available at: https://www.essex.police.uk/news/essex/news/news/2026/february/epping-man-charged-after-alleged-racial-abuse-of-officer-during-protest-activity/ ; Simon Dedman, Helen Burchell, and James Chater (2025) 'Police make three arrests during Epping protest'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c24z0105m24o

12 'Everything Epping Forest'. Available at https://tinyurl.com/2sunaacr

13 Lottie Elton (2025) 'Asylum hotel protests are spreading. Who's really behind them?'. Available at: https://www.bigissue.com/news/politics/asylum-hotel-protests-far-right-epping/

14 Sky News (2025) 'Essex Police say Nigel Farage claims about migrant hotel protest are 'categorically wrong"' Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/essex-police-say-claims-by-nigel-farage-that-officers-bussed-in-counter-demonstrators-to-migrant-hotel-protest-are-categorically-wrong-13400630

15 Ben Quinn (2025) 'Police dismiss claims they bussed anti-racists to Epping asylum hotel protest'. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jul/23/essex-police-dismiss-claims-bussed-in-anti-racists-epping-asylum-hotel-protest

The council's legal challenges were rejected by the High Court, Court of Appeal, and Supreme Court, with the courts citing, among other reasons, the Home Office's statutory duties under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.[16] However, in June 2026, the Home Office announced that the hotel's asylum accommodation contract would permanently end, along with multiple others in the country.[17] This decision reflected the government's wider objective of phasing out asylum hotels and relocating residents to "larger, more basic" housing such as military barracks.[18]

SECTION 2
FINDINGS

This section sets out the findings of the research. It begins with the context: what matters most to local people in Epping Forest (2.1), before examining the false claims circulating among residents about asylum accommodation in the district (2.2), which parts of information infrastructure they have stopped trusting (2.3), and which they actually use and trust (2.4), before turning to conclusions.

2.1 EPPING FOREST RESIDENTS VALUE THEIR COMMUNITY

While this study focuses on local information supply chains in the context of asylum accommodation, it is important to understand the wider context and core needs described by the residents engaged.

Residents care about the physical and social infrastructure that feels increasingly strained

Like many towns and cities across the UK, Epping Forest residents care primarily that their town was serving them. Concerns around the declining state of some local physical infrastructure - from potholes to housing - and the stresses they perceived on local public services were paramount in discussions. Whilst most felt proud of where they lived and enjoyed the balance of town and nature, many felt that a lack of funding for these essentials was now showing up in their every-day quality of life.

> *"Traffic [is a] nightmare. Parkings, potholes are ridiculous. Oh yeah, really bad. Everything's just kind of getting worn out, isn't it? It is like they're just not replacing stuff"*
> ***(Laura, Traditional Conservative, 52)***

16 Epping Forest District Council (2025) 'Council granted interim injunction to stop asylum accommodation'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/council-granted-interim-injunction-to-stop-asylum-accommodation/ ; UK Supreme Court (2025) CASE DETAILS: 'Secretary of State for the Home Department and another (Respondents) v Epping Forest District Council (Appellant)'. Available at: https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2025-0171

17 Simon Dedman (2026) 'Epping asylum hotel to close by July, says MP". Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq51l7dn7d4o

18 UK Government (2026) 'Asylum hotels close as government scales up use of large sites'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/asylum-hotels-close-as-government-scales-up-use-of-large-sites

Residents are proud of their high street

Epping Forest residents shared their pride in the Epping town high street - for its pubs, cafes, and independent shops rather than corporate chains. These are valued because it gives the town a close-knit community feel and means there are lots of familiar faces. Residents shared concerns that the protests outside the Bell Hotel in summer 2025 negatively impacted these local independent businesses because the roads were forced to close.

> *"I think Epping is one of those places where it feels very authentic. I think a lot of the high streets or villages are losing their personal feel. Everything feels chainey or a bit more corporate."*
> ***(Julie, Incrementalist Left, 57)***

Local people don't want Epping's story written by outsiders

Amongst the pride felt by many local people about where they lived was a frustration with the district's centrality in national news over the past two years. Some residents shared that narratives about the events in Epping in July 2025 were 'sensationalised' in national media by people who weren't even living there, and that politicians were using the Bell Hotel for their own gain.

> *"It felt like a very local issue [...] And then I saw it on the national news and I did remember thinking, is this really national news? I don't know, for me it felt like they were sensationalising it. They were making it a bigger thing."*
> ***(Karen, Established Liberal, 47)***

> *"They [national politicians] are using Epping and the hotel to push their agenda"*
> ***(Richard, Incrementalist Left, 63)***

2.2 LOCAL INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN FAILURE ENABLED FALSE AND HATEFUL CLAIMS TO SPREAD

Many local residents shared frustration about the weaknesses in the local information supply chain during the protests. This section outlines those weaknesses, and their impacts on local residents.

False claims about the Bell Hotel

Residents and stakeholder respondents reported several misleading or factually inaccurate claims about asylum accommodation in the district. For example, claims that the Bell Hotel is a five star hotel providing asylum seekers with luxury accommodation; the Bell Hotel is a "halfway house" providing accommodation to prison leavers; and hotel residents are provided with designer clothing and new mobile phones from public funds.[19] All of these things are untrue, but their prevalence in some form in all focus groups demonstrated the reach and penetration of these claims online. Many who raised such claims did so believing them to be true.

19 The Bell Hotel is a three star hotel, contrary to claims circulated on social media and the press, according to the director of a local organisation supporting asylum-seekers. In a debate in Parliament, MP for Clapham and Brixton Hill Bell Ribeiro-Addy dispelled misinformed claims that asylum-seekers are housed in 'luxury accommodation'. See here: UK Parliament, House of Commons (2025) 'Asylum Seekers: Support and Accommodation', 20 October. Available at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-10-20/debates/5B57404B-1EB6-4652-93C9-26B8F084AEFA/AsylumSeekersSupportAndAccommodation ; Asylum seekers are only provided any kind pf phone by the government on rare occasions. More often, they are provided by local charities, see: Full Fact (2026) 'What support do asylum seekers get in the UK?'. Available here: https://fullfact.org/immigration/asylum-seeker-support-faqs/#eight

False claims that hotels were housing 'illegal immigrants'

The terms 'asylum seekers' and 'illegal immigrants' were frequently used interchangeably when talking about the hotels. These misinformed or incorrect views show that local understanding of asylum accommodation was weak, misled, or inaccurate - the difference between asylum seekers and 'illegal immigrants' is a foundational piece of information needed to properly understand and assess a policy unfolding in the local area.

> *"The problem in the end was whether, if I'm not mistaken, the hotel didn't initially apply for a licence to house illegal immigrants and I think that's where it started get a little bit sort of uneasy I suppose"*
> ***(Patrick, Rooted Patriot, 62)***

False claims about school intrusions by asylum seekers

Another incident in September 2025 also revealed how factually incorrect claims about asylum accommodation continued to proliferate locally. Following a summer of protests, there was widespread concern and online outrage in September when rumours circulated that an asylum seeker had trespassed onto school sites in Loughton and Waltham Abbey.[20] However, these claims were later clarified as untrue when Essex Police released a statement stating that nobody had improperly entered or attempted to enter the school in Waltham Abbey. The police also clarified that a homeless man had accessed an area of a school playing field, where he was seen looking in the bins for food.[21] This incident shows how local events in Epping Forest were misrepresented, with false and harmful narratives about asylum seekers gaining credibility among residents.

Impacts of online anti-migrant hatred and misinformation

A small number of local stakeholders and residents outlined the negative impacts of the harmful online information about asylum-seekers and the accompanying protests. They expressed concerns that hateful and misleading information was fuelling outrage, entrenching community divisions, and amplifying hostility towards asylum-seekers.

Local councillors and a small number of residents questioned whether harmful online content was exacerbating outrage and entrenching community division. A local Councillor suggested it was the misleading *"information that makes people very angry"* ***(Epping Forest Councillor)***, while one resident said that information circulating about the Bell Hotel *"really has divided people"* ***(Richard, Incrementalist Left, 63)***. He also described a wider *"blame culture"*, in which asylum-seekers were blamed for unrelated local incidents.

The director of a local organisation supporting asylum-seekers reported that the protests caused intense fear and anxiety among hotel residents. Some reportedly felt unsafe leaving the hotel – such as for English classes, volunteering opportunities, or even a walk – and only left when absolutely necessary, such as for medical appointments or Home Office meetings. She also raised concerns about residents' physical safety after influencers or 'hotel auditors' filmed them without consent and uploaded the footage online.

Local stakeholders who challenged misinformation or attempted to provide counter-narratives also reported significant abuse. For example, a local councillor who publicly challenged incorrect or hateful information reported receiving death threats, with people physically attacking her home. Reflecting on the protests, she described it as *"a really genuinely scary time for anybody brown-skinned"*, saying *"there was a lynch mob out there."* ***(Epping Forest Councillor)***

20 Laure Fidler (2025) 'Police issue statement on misinformation over alleged incidents at schools'. Available at: https://www.essexlive.news/news/essex-news/police-issue-statement-misinformation-over-10510357

21 Epping Forest District Council (2025) 'Waltham Abbey school safety concerns' Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/waltham-abbey-school-safety-concerns/

Overall, these accounts suggest that false or misleading online information had consequences that extended beyond online spaces. Residents and local stakeholders described increased fear among asylum-seekers, harassment and threats against those challenging misinformation, and heightened divisions and hostility within the wider Epping Forest community.

2.3 DECLINING TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AS PILLARS OF INFORMATION

This section outlines: a decline in pluralistic local journalism that has left Epping Forest a news 'dryland' and a monopoly district; a crisis in trust in mainstream media for perceived bias and dishonesty; a broader erosion of faith in national politicians and political institutions; and low levels of information from local authorities and local elected representatives.

Epping Forest as a local news 'dryland'

A decline in the plurality of local news provision

Epping Forest district lacks local media plurality and independent ownership, with its sole surviving local news outlet: the Epping Forest Guardian. Local stakeholders believe this is impacting the depth and originality of local reporting. Additionally, this sole remaining local newspaper in the district has weak readership among residents.

This decline has left Epping Forest a 'news dryland' - as the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) labels.[22] In 2025, PINF also identified Epping Forest as a 'monopoly district' - meaning a single company - usually one of a small number of major publishers, owns the only local news title covering the district.[23]

Thirty years ago, Epping Forest's local media landscape could be described as a 'news oasis'.[24] At least five local newspapers produced original reporting on local issues. They covered local politics, council communications, community events, and public services. These included the Harlow Herald, Harlow Star, Brentwood Gazette, Essex Chronicle, and the Epping Forest Guardian.

Since then, these newspapers have either been acquired by Reach or Newsquest, closed, or been merged into larger titles.[25] In 2008, Newsquest merged EFG with three other North London newspapers, and relocated its newsdesk to Watford, meaning that journalists covering Epping Forest now report from 41 miles away.[26]

Engagement and trust in the sole local news outlet is low

Residents said that their readership of EFG was limited. When asked, residents said they preferred information from local Facebook groups to local journalistic reporting, because updates appeared more quickly. Across all five focus groups, many - particularly younger and newer - residents said they were unaware that the EFG even existed.

22 Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) (2025) 'Local News Report 2025'. Available at: https://storage.ghost.io/c/27/ee/27ee876d-8f09-407d-8f7d-d7506b4bb036/content/files/2025/12/PINF-Local-News-Report-2025--8-December-.pdf

23 Ibid

24 Ibid

25 In 2010, the Harlow Herald closed. In 2015, Reach acquired the Harlow Star, Brentwood Gazette, and Essex Chronicle, while the Harlow Star ceased publication. In 2016, the Brentwood Gazette moved online. See here: https://www.yourharlow.com/2019/01/23/yourharlow-our-commitment-to-the-people-of-harlow/#google_vignette ; BBC (2019) 'Harlow Star and three other newspapers to close in print'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-46985359 ; Dominic Ponsford (2019) 'Guest comment: After 97 years in print, Brentwood Gazette is being sacrificed at the altar of digital publishing'. Available at: https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/guest-comment-after-97-years-in-print-brentwood-gazette-is-being-sacrificed-at-the-altar-of-digital-publishing/ .

26 Freddy Mayhew (2022) 'Newsquest merges three London weeklies into one new title with launch of East London and West Essex Guardian'. Available at: https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/newsquest-merges-three-london-weeklies-into-one-new-title-with-launch-of-east-london-and-west-essex-guardian/

"I only bought [a copy of the EFG] recently and I had to pay for it because we needed newspaper to cover our windows… Not because I wanted to read it… that stuff was all online, it's all very easily available. I wouldn't spend whatever I spent, one pound ten, on stuff that one my next door neighbour could have told me"
(Giles, Dissenting Disruptor, 64)

Concerns about the quality of available local news

One local journalist believes that the decline in Epping Forest's local media plurality and the concentrated ownership structure of the EFG has reduced the depth and originality of local reporting. While it once produced more than 90 pages of local coverage, reporting now consists of "extremely thin pages" containing mainly "brief summaries" of press releases rather than investigative journalism. The EFG has a website, *"but there's never anything local on it [...] it's all stuff from any other … London Newsquest or Reach title that they just lift the content from [...] that's no interest to Epping Forest."* A local councillor similarly described the state of local media by saying: *"that fox is shot"*.

The BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) - which funds place-based journalists to cover local politics - allocated two reporters to Essex County Council for 2025-2027, which includes the district of Epping Forest.[27] However, while there could be a myriad reasons for this, a manual online search found that the Essex local democracy reporters did not report extensively (i.e. more than twice) on the asylum hotels during the height of the unrest.[28]

Low trust in national mainstream media

Epping Forest residents reported low levels of trust in national mainstream news media - by which they meant public service broadcasters, such as the BBC and ITV, alongside major national newspapers like the Daily Mail or The Guardian.

Scepticism in mainstream outlets was consistent across political orientation

Many residents viewed these outlets as biassed, driven by hidden agendas or a desire to push *"propaganda"*:

"I don't trust them [mainstream media]. [...] I've experienced their broadcasting for decades and I can see the examples of how incorrect and one-sided they are, and how manipulative they tend to be. [...] It's not just relaying information. They sensationalise things to sway certain opinions."
(Dylan, Established Liberal, 44)

This concern was shared in multiple focus groups, covering various segments, demonstrating that it wasn't a one-sided political point of view taken by one group alone.

Despite widespread scepticism, a minority of participants expressed more positive views of mainstream media. Some residents from different political segments explained that they used it to verify information they encountered on social media, comparing reporting across formal and informal sources to build a fuller understanding of local events.

27 BBC (2025) 'Local Democracy Reporting Service'.
Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/lnp/documents/local-democracy-reporter-contract-areas-2025-to-2027.pdf

28 A manual online scan found two publications only from Meyler and Critchell during summer/autumn 2025, published in the East Anglia Bylines and Essex Live. See: Piers Meyler (2025) 'The £1.7m bill: Essex Police under pressure from Epping asylum protests'. Available at: https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/immigration/the-1-7m-bill-essex-police-under-pressure-from-epping-asylum-protests/ ; Matthew Critchell (2025) 'Working-class families 'kicked out of homes for asylum seeker housing' council leader claims' Available at: https://www.essexlive.news/news/essex-news/working-class-families-kicked-out-10455935

"And there's a lot of things on Facebook saying stabbings and everything else, and some are really graphic and they say, "No, this has happened." But then you get the paper or you hear the news and it's not even mentioned on the news. So then you doubt whether it's actually true or not."
(Claire, Traditional Conservative, 67)

The BBC received pointed criticism

When discussing their distrust, residents tended to focus primarily on the BBC. Residents gave different reasons for this. One local person referred to the BBC's misleading editing of a speech made by Trump in January 2021, which the BBC later apologised for and acknowledged had created "the mistaken impression that President Trump had made a direct call for violent action".[29]

"You got to take it with a pinch of salt, especially the BBC"
(Sally, Rooted Patriot, 50)

Another shared they distrusted the BBC because of its reporting on the 2024 Southport attack. She believed the BBC had incorrectly reported that the attacker was not an illegal immigrant - *"That's when I knew I didn't really trust it, because they covered it up."* ***(Lucie Dissenting Disruptor, 18)***. However, these beliefs are factually incorrect - the BBC accurately reported that the attacker was not an illegal immigrant. Her account nevertheless illustrates how misinformation surrounding the Southport attack contributed to perceptions of mainstream media. It also shows how these perceptions continued to influence trust nearly two years later.

Only a few were more complimentary about the BBC, even if they were in the minority among their friends.

"Well I've always liked the BBC, but everyone tells me that you can't trust them."
(Rufus, Dissenting Disruptor, 66)

One local councillor said that the BBC does take an interest in local events and properly fact check their stories, saying: *"I've got to say they always get it right."* Another councillor expressed profound disappointment that the BBC has lost its *"fantastic reputation… as a trusted tool"* among local residents.

"If a news story broke, people would just check with the BBC. People don't do that anymore. [...] Once the trust is gone, it's gone. It's very difficult to rebuild [...] It would take years, decades to build that trust up again, which is why it's so important to always be honest and transparent."
(Epping Forest councillor)

GB News was highlighted as a preferred outlet by some

Several residents said they preferred GB News for national news. These respondents were typically older (aged 50+) and were most commonly 'Dissenting Disruptors'. They praised GB News for its perceived willingness to cover issues they believed were ignored by mainstream media. They described its discussion style as *"raw"*, *"refreshing"*, *"less structured"*, and *"more animated"*. A local councillor echoed this observation, but expressed his concern that part of the community was *"clearly mainlining GB News"* and accepting its narratives without challenge.

29 Noor Nanji (2025) 'BBC apologises to Trump over Panorama edit but refuses to pay compensation'. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c874nw4g2zzo

Overall, scepticism towards mainstream media was far more common than trust. This distrust may have contributed to a turn towards digital-first or emergent news providers such as GB News or local Facebook groups for local information, as explored in section 2.4 in this report.

Local government communications

Online analysis and interviews evidenced there were some efforts from both Epping Town and Epping Forest District councils to share information on civic issues (via press releases, and social media accounts). However, local focus group members had low levels of engagement with local government communications, demonstrating limited awareness of where they might find such communication or that they would necessarily trust it if they did hear it.

The respective councils have low social media followings

Epping Town and Epping Forest District council publish information via their website and/or on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X. They share information on specific civic issues such as bin collections, planning works and local infrastructure such as water services, flytipping, and events in the community. However, their respective follower counts are significantly lower (below 10k) than the largest Facebook group (37,000 followers) and their following seems to demonstrate limited reach within the entire population.

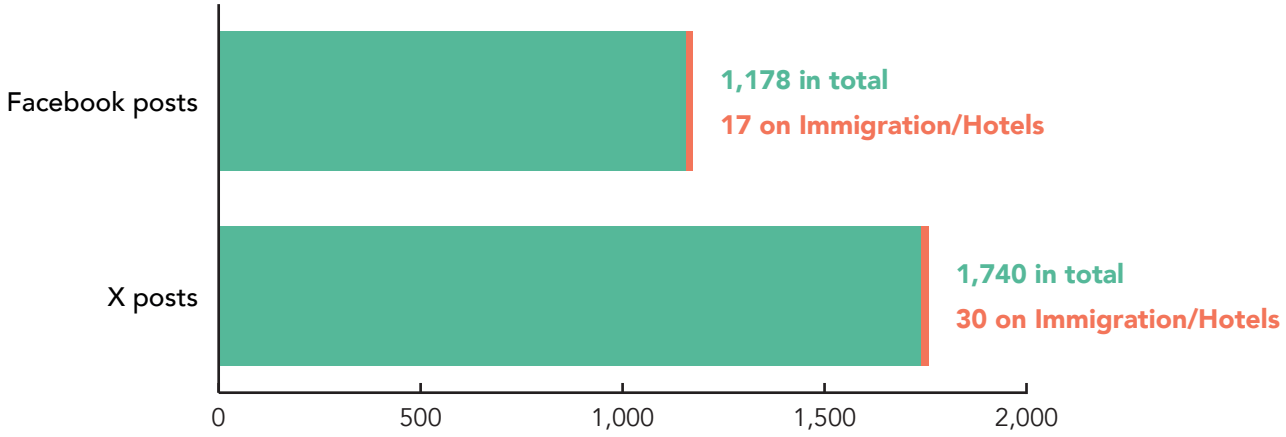
SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING OF RELEVANT COUNCILS ACROSS X, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

COUNCIL	PLATFORM	FOLLOWING[30]
Epping Forest District Council Total population[31] = 137,451	**X**	**9.6k**
	Facebook	**6.5k**
	Instagram	**3.5k**
	Total followers	**19,600**
Epping Town Council Total population[32] = 12,000	**X**	**2.6k**
	Facebook	**908**
	Instagram	**264**
	Total followers	**3,772**

On the topic of asylum accommodation, the local councils shared low volumes of information on social media. Only 47 out of 2,918 posts on Facebook and X by Epping Forest District council between January 2024 and December 2025 related to asylum accommodation.[33] Epping Forest Council does have a page on their website dedicated to the Bell Hotel where they posted fairly consistently - mostly updates on the court cases mentioned in the introduction - between July 2025 (first post on page) and December 2025 with a total of 26 posts about hotel updates, but focus group findings indicate visitation to this page may be limited.[34]

30 Noted 06.08.2026
31 Office for National Statistics (2024) 'Epping Forest: Explore Local Statistics'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E07000072-epping-forest
32 Epping Town Council. 'About Epping'. Available at: https://www.eppingtowncouncil.gov.uk/About_Epping_35168.aspx
33 Based on the following keyword search: asylum, immigration, The Bell or Phoenix Hotel, asylum/migrant/immigrant/refugee hotel, and contingency accommodation.
34 Epping Forest District Council 'Bell Hotel' news archive. Available at: https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/category/news/bell-hotel/

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL X AND FACEBOOK COMMUNICATIONS ON LOCAL HOTELS



Residents are frustrated with council information-sharing

Residents and local stakeholders did not typically view local government as a key information actor. In fact, residents across all five focus groups explained that they did not receive information from the councils during the asylum hotel protests.

> *"There was no communication from the council. No information through the door. It could have been a simple email with what they are trying to do to alleviate the situation."*
> ***(Eleanor, Rooted Patriot, 37)***

Most residents also described having little offline or online engagement with their Councillors - many didn't even know who their councillor was. This frustrated local people who felt they should have more access to their elected representatives and engagement on the topics that matter to them and their communities.

> *"I've never seen a Councillor in the local area. It would be nice if he turned up."*
> ***(Claire, Traditional Conservative, 67)***

Local Councillors interviewed acknowledged themselves that an online information gap existed between Epping Forest residents and councillors, which they believed had left residents feeling unheard in local politics. The means and amount of online engagement from local representatives is largely dictated by the personal preferences and actions of each individual councillor - some may be far more active, whilst others opt for limited engagement, especially online.

Collapsing trust in national government

Trust in national government and elected officials was low across the board amongst residents. Across divergent political segments, many described national politicians as lacking honesty and authenticity.

A general lack of trust of both national politicians and 'elites'

An overall crisis of trust in national politicians, and 'elites' more broadly emerged in all five focus groups. This appeared to be, in part, driven by a view on the behaviour and motivations of MPs and other national politicians - believing they mostly operate out of political interest and therefore the information they shared may not be trustworthy.

"You have to take what politicians say with a pinch of salt. They'll try to make you believe something that's not actually truthful."
(Michael, Rooted Patriot, 52)

Some went even further than that, insinuating that there was in fact cooperation or plotting amongst elites or backroom figures that have huge sway and influence over politicians and politics - not just in the UK, but around the world.

"anyone that reads or knows politics should know that [Trump is] just the puppet and there's quite a few far more powerful people than Trump pulling his strings and his mouth just goes awry."
(Laura, Traditional Conservative, 52)

Frustration with politicians during the protests

Residents also discussed the role of national politicians during the asylum hotel protests. Several left-leaning residents felt that Epping had become a focal point for wider political agendas.

"They [national politicians] are using Epping and the hotel to push their agenda"
(Richard, Incrementalist Left, 63).

"Epping has become a place for people to get known and recognised. It's not just Adam Brooks but political forces and politicians like Robert Jenrick."
(Director of a local civil society organisation)

A local activist group committed to community cohesion also criticised certain politicians for backing anti-migrant protestors in their online communications. Robert Jenrick and Kemi Badenoch visited Epping to meet anti-migrant protesters, later publishing their support online alongside proposals to "deport all foreign criminals and all illegal arrivals".[35] By contrast, the activist group felt that politicians who opposed the protests gave little visible support to counter-protesters believing they had failed to publicly challenge anti-migrant sentiment.

When prompted, only a small number of respondents could identify national politicians they trusted. Others could not name anyone. One person said he trusted Wes Streeting (Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at the time) because the Labour MP had personally visited his children's school to discuss interfaith communities.[36] Another described Keir Starmer (Prime Minister at the time) as a *"decent, genuine man"* ***(Richard, Incrementalist Left, 63)***, whilst a further person expressed trust in Rupert Lowe, leader of Restore Britain, because he *"seemed more genuine"* ***(Lucie, Dissenting Disruptor, 18)***. These responses suggest that perceptions of authenticity and direct engagement with constituents were important drivers of political trust.

2.4 TRUST TURNING ONLINE AND INWARDS

In the context of declining trust in more established institutions, Epping Forest residents turned to social media discourse to access information about their local area, including via Facebook groups, other non-Facebook social media platforms including WhatsApp and TikTok, and local influencers.

35 On 18 August 2025, Robert Jenrick (then Shadow Justice Secretary) attended and posted from a rally outside the Bell Hotel. See: The Guardian (2025) 'Robert Jenrick visits rally outside Bell Hotel in Epping'. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/aug/18/labour-robert-jenrick-visit-rally-far-right-activist-bell-hotel-epping
On 14 August 2025, Kemi Badenoch travelled there. See: Conservatives (2025) 'Kemi meets with parents concerned about migrant hotels'. Available at: https://www.conservatives.com/news/kemi-meets-with-parents-concerned-about-migrant-hotels

36 UK Parliament 'Contact: Wes Streeting'. Available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/4504/contact

Local and hyperlocal Facebook channels for local information

Most Epping Forest residents are using a range of social media platforms to access local information. These include TikTok, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and, to a lesser extent, X. Facebook channels were, by far, the most trusted source across segments.

Facebook as the local town square

Facebook was the most prominent online platform in the local information supply chain. When asked which information sources they use to access local news in pre-focus group surveys, three quarters of residents (33 of 44 residents) said they used local Facebook groups or pages.

> *"Everyone's on Facebook [...] it's been the main place for updates since the Bell Hotel."*
> ***(Darren, Rooted Patriot, 53)***

The local Facebook channels form an ecosystem at various local and hyperlocal geographic levels - from district-wide, to ward-level. Some local Facebook channels are pages (public, one-way broadcasting tools) and others are groups (two-way, community-focused spaces that more easily enable discussion and peer-to-peer engagement).

At a district-wide level, residents named the following pages and groups as those they access:[37]

- ***Epping Community Group (Essex, UK)*** – 37,400 members – Group
- ***Everything Epping Forest*** – 28,000 members – Group
- ***Anything Epping*** – 7,200 members – Group
- ***Epping Community Group*** – 5,200 members – Group
- ***Epping Says NO*** – 3,700 members – Group
- ***Epping for Everyone*** – 3,600 followers – Page
- ***Epping Forest Forum*** – 1,300 followers – Page

At a hyperlocal level, residents named even more Facebook groups:

- ***LOUGHTON ESSEX MUMS AND DADS NEWS, INFO AND EVENTS*** – 18,300 members – Group
- ***Buckhurst Hill Life*** – 6,400 members – Group
- ***Chigwell Life*** – 1,300 members – Group
- ***Coopersale Village Page*** – 845 members – Group
- ***Living in Epping Green Village*** – 714 members – Group

A Councillor for North Weald Bassett even mapped a network of Facebook groups in his ward:

- ***North Weald news, selling & promoting!*** – 4,700 members – Group
- ***North Weald Village Life*** – 3,200 members – Group
- ***North Weald community*** – 1,500 members – Group
- ***Anything North Weald (No Rules)*** – 1,500 members – Group

Residents said they used these Facebook groups to access, share, and discuss local information.

37 Note this list is not exhaustive, but solely those mentioned by residents. All information on following/membership collected 7th July 2026.

Topics included local politics, planning applications, crime, transport, community events, and everyday neighbourhood issues. Especially in the summer of 2025, asylum accommodation was also a topic.

Residents value the speed and role of community in sharing information via Facebook

When sharing motivations for using local Facebook channels so adamantly, residents outlined the value of speed of dissemination and the community-based production of information. Some explained that other sources of local information – such as local journalism, national media, or institutional communications – would take far longer to reach them than information shared via local Facebook channels and that, by that time, it may already be out of date.

> *"Yeah, I'm on quite a few Facebook groups [...] in fact you're going to find out a lot quicker for that than reading a newspaper because the news is old by the time it's actually printed."*
> ***(Chris, Established Liberal, 54)***

Several residents specifically valued that - in their eyes - it was community members that produced the information they received via these channels, rather than the external or institutional providers that they trust less.

> *"I would trust more what I see on Facebook from another mum or parent than I would for what I see on the news."*
> ***(Sandra, Traditional Conservative, 70)***

CASE STUDY: EVERYTHING EPPING FOREST

Everything Epping Forest is a Facebook group occupying the boundary between an independent local media outlet and a local Facebook group. Founded initially as a webpage in 2008, *Everything Epping Forest* covers a range of local news content - from traffic and road incidents; to council updates including planning applications and taxes; to community news with information on local events, new shops and success stories.

The information takes the form of news articles produced by the former editor of the Epping Forest Guardian and a journalist by training, who said: *"Good journalism is the most important bit - if it takes longer to put something out, so be it. I make sure everything is balanced, not sensationalised. I let the facts tell the story."*

Locally in Epping Forest, *Everything Epping Forest* is widely accessed with 28,000 members (roughly 20% of Epping Forest's population). Its reach across all social media and email platforms is estimated at between 60,000 and 67,000 followers.

A number of local information actors and many residents held positive perceptions of the page. MP Neil Hudson praised it in a Parliamentary debate for its *"vital role in the community"*.[38] One Councillor referred to its founder and editor as *"Mr Local Knowledge"*, saying he was *"the only hyperlocal journalist left in Epping"*.

However, some local actors raised concerns over political bias, including around the Bell Hotel, suggesting the page may favour certain political persuasions more than others.

38 Holly Brencher (2025) 'Watch: Epping Forest MP Dr Neil Hudson praises the work of Guardian'. Available at: https://www.eppingforestguardian.co.uk/news/25672427.watch-epping-forest-mp-dr-neil-hudson-praises-work-guardian/

Local Facebook groups where misinformation proliferated

Despite many positive views, there were also concerns about the quality of information being disseminated via local Facebook groups - including on asylum accommodation. These concerns were shared by residents across all five focus groups.

Primarily, those concerned noted the inaccurate nature of information they encountered on Facebook.

> *"It could be a rumour [...] Someone puts it on social media, someone then tells everyone and that's how no one knows the truth anymore because there's so many different variations of what actually goes on. I've got no idea."*
> ***(Chris, Established Liberal, 54)***

The low trust in information found on local Facebook groups was particularly heightened among left-leaning residents in relation to information circulating in July 2025 about the sexual assault incidents by a hotel resident. Many residents and local stakeholders shared confusion around the incidents saying they struggled to distinguish the facts from online discussion of the events.

> *"No one fully knows 100 per cent what happened. It would be good to have more facts [...]"*
> ***(Esther, Progressive Activist, 51)***

Additionally, local stakeholders raised concerns about the speed that inaccurate information can be disseminated online. One Councillor stated: *"Somebody can post something, and it could be misinformation, but then it will spread like wildfire, and unfortunately people take the baton [...] and run with it."* ***(Epping Forest Councillor)***

Facebook admins as influential community information gatekeepers

In multiple groups, the administrators of these Facebook channels - often everyday people from the community - were raised as an important local information actor. Each local Facebook channel has an administrator but their approach to moderation varies drastically. Some groups in Epping Forest are more strictly managed, while others are largely unmoderated. Given the prominent role that local Facebook groups play in the information ecosystem in Epping Forest, including on local discussions around asylum accommodation, local Facebook admins hold significant influence within the local information supply chain.

The Facebook group *'Epping Community Group (Essex, UK)'* was shared as one example of a largely unmoderated group. A local activist group committed to community cohesion said that the administrator often allowed misleading, factually incorrect, and discriminatory content to circulate. For example, a post comparing the IQs of different ethnic groups remained visible and unchallenged on the group. With 37,000 members, the group is the largest local Facebook group out of those we identified and information shared within the group therefore has significant reach within the district of Epping Forest. One left-leaning resident said he considered leaving the group altogether because it was *"incredibly racist"*, though in the end decided to stay because he thought it was important to actively try to counter information that he saw people posting when it was clearly incorrect.

> *"It was a cesspit and no moderation."*
> ***(Activist from an Epping community cohesion group)***

CASE STUDY: EPPING FOR EVERYONE FACEBOOK PAGE - LOCAL VOLUNTEERS UNDERTAKING CONTENT MODERATION

Epping for Everyone has been established as a Facebook page as opposed to a group where followers are unable to post content, only comment on content, and as such the page admins hold greater control over what is shared. Comments on the page are moderated by a core team of seven moderators who have devised their own daily rota to ensure that at least one individual permanently holds active oversight of the information posted.

While the team does not have a concrete, written policy for their approach to moderation, in interviews, they reflected a nuanced, and purposefully developed approach. They view their responsibility as administrators as creating a *"safe space"* that upholds the principle of *"fact, not fear"*. They remove content that they can prove to be factually incorrect or incites violence. They choose to leave content that is deemed hateful or inflammatory, but respond publicly by commenting on the post to outline how it proliferates hateful or discriminatory views.

The moderators emphasised the need to be robust in handling hateful content and the mental toll it can take to read and engage – they said that some days they have to log off for their own wellbeing because the content is so hard to read. They also explained the responsibility they feel to get the moderation correctly – for community safety, cohesion, wellbeing, and civil liberties. All of these admin group members care deeply about the public perception of Epping and how it has been portrayed in the broader media landscape - which was partly the inspiration for holding such an online space.

One Councillor explained that in his ward, parts of the community disagreed outright with the moderation of local Facebook groups. He explained that charges of censorship have led some residents to found 'splinter' Facebook groups specifically without moderation: the village-level group *'North Weald community'* received more active moderation from admins, which other residents opposed on the basis of free speech arguments, and decided to found *'Anything North Weald (No Rules)'*, the bio for which states: *"The same group, just with No Rules! Argue until you get bored!"*[39]

WhatsApp and TikTok's role in the local information environment

Alongside Facebook channels, residents in Epping Forest shared that they frequently use WhatsApp groups with neighbours, friends, colleagues, and more to access local news and, to a lesser extent, TikTok - which was primarily used by younger residents. Trust in local information shared via WhatsApp was consistently high, whereas experiences of using TikTok were more varied.

WhatsApp a key source for hyper local information and community support

In all focus groups, WhatsApp was a frequently-used platform for instantaneous and frequent updates between neighbours, family and friends. In a post-focus group survey, over half (26 of 44 residents) said they used WhatsApp to hear about local news. Of those who frequently used the app, many spoke of its speed and active engagement from their community on local topics.

One resident said she receives local information via WhatsApp *"the minute someone hears anything"* ***(Karen, Established Liberal, 47)***, while another resident said that he sometimes has

39 Facebook page: 'Anything North Weald (No Rules)'. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/673602723125092

to mute local WhatsApp groups because there will be hundreds of messages coming through in a short space of time.

Epping Forest residents said they use WhatsApp groups for a number of purposes. Some said they use it for community safety, sharing alerts about local burglaries, or activity they find suspicious on their street or local area. Others said the groups act as practical tools for mutual aid - to coordinate support for vulnerable or elderly neighbours such as delivering shopping or medical prescriptions. Residents also said they use WhatsApp groups for sharing council information with each other, for example, bin collection timetables or subscription charges. A few mentioned that these WhatsApp chats have been a central part of how they kept abreast of the asylum hotel discussions and updates on the policy.

Residents expressed a high level of trust in WhatsApp groups because they *"know the people"* taking part. Indeed, some village WhatsApp groups, like the one in Theydon Bois, enforce strict vetting where residents must provide their exact address and personal details before being admitted by the group's administrator. The same cannot be said for all WhatsApo groups, but there was a general perception that there would be no reason for non-locals to engage.

TikTok is more likely used among younger residents for occasional local content

By contrast, TikTok was used by Epping Forest residents in a very different way to both WhatsApp and Facebook channels.

In a pre-focus group survey, only one resident said they used TikTok, while a few more in focus groups said they also used the platform. These residents were younger, Gen Z respondents who shared they used TikTok more for passive scrolling rather than actively seeking out local information - mostly relying on the 'For You Page' algorithm to recommend videos. This would sometimes include local content, but was often far broader and more general.

One younger resident said that TikTok was a primary channel for her to learn about the Bell Hotel and the ensuing riots by tuning into videos and live-streamed broadcasts of the unrest posted by 'TikTok reporters' or influencers.

A generational divide emerged between residents on the use of TikTok for local news. Unlike younger residents, older locals expressed high levels of mistrust in information shared on the platform. A few warned that "you've got to be careful" with the information shared on TikTok, viewing it as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories where vulnerable users can easily fall deep *"down the rabbit hole"* ***(Jackie, Dissenting Disruptor, 51)***.

A local influencer as an "outrage merchant"

Within the social media ecosystem for Epping Forest, influencers were cited as emerging and prominent voices within the local information ecosystem. When prompted for specific voices, at least one resident in every focus group named Adam Brooks – a local social media influencer, GB News presenter, and boxer – as one prominent local news source. Brooks, a one time local night-club promoter who was generally already known in the town, became better known after his consistent posting and livestreaming from outside the Bell Hotel in 2025.

Opinions on Brooks were divided. A significant portion of residents across political orientations viewed Brooks as an authentic community figure who provided trusted local information, particularly on the topic of asylum accommodation. However, a minority took a strongly diverging view - believing Brooks was untrustworthy and even dangerous.

> *"He's doing it all for the Bell Hotel, speaking on everyone's behalf. He's all over social media."*
> ***(Maggie, Established Liberal, 50)***

Many residents cited his identity as a local community figure as the primary factor driving trust. Several residents said they knew him personally or knew someone who knew him – whether from Brooks' time as a nightclub owner, from childhood, or from spending time at the pubs he runs.

> *"He's a proper Essex Boy. He's what I grew up knowing from the boys in the youth club, the boys in the nightclub. He's very relatable. He comes across as very passionate because it's his area."*
> ***(Jackie, Dissenting Disruptor, 51)***

These residents felt that Brooks was better placed to represent or speak on behalf of the local area because he grew up locally, compared with external journalists who have no connection to Epping Forest. Some focused on his perceived authenticity and genuineness in marked opposition to the perceived dishonesty of national politicians and mainstream media.

> *"Local people know much more about their local area than these big companies. People who live in the area and know the area. Adam Brooks is from the area."*
> ***(Helen, Dissenting Disruptor, 46)***

On the other hand, some had concerns about his motivations and level of accuracy. Robert, an Established Liberal, said that Brooks was using his social media reporting on immigration to *"build a political career"* and to gain followers rather than out of genuine concern, while Denise, a Dissenting Disruptor, said she had started fact-checking his posts because she did not believe all his views or information was correct. Several stakeholders also viewed Brooks as a prominent source of tension and *"scaremongering"* in the town, *"blatantly anti-Muslim"*, and pointed to factual inaccuracies that served to exacerbate outrage and division. A Councillor, who described Brooks as an *"outrage merchant"*, referred to a post that Brooks shared stating that the Bell Hotel had hundreds of rooms housing illegal immigrants, when official figures state that there are only 80 rooms, and only houses individuals seeking asylum.[40]

Local stakeholders and residents across all focus groups said that, during the height of the anti-migrant protests, they frequently saw influencers posting online content about the Bell Hotel in Epping, including often filming outside the hotel itself. On some days there were more influencers down there than actual protestors. They recounted that "fake news journalists" would travel to Epping from across the country to *"get the worst content they can to get views"* ***(Ryan, Progressive Activist, 48)***. However, when prompted for names of these influencers and content creators, they were often unable to specify. This suggests that local engagement with influencers that were perceived to be travelling to Epping from externally was low.

CASE STUDY: ADAM BROOKS

Born and raised in Essex, Adam Brooks wears many hats. He has become a national media personality on social media platforms such as Instagram, X, and Facebook and joined GB News as a regular panellist in 2021. In a previous life, he owned a popular nightclub in Loughton, a town in Epping Forest District. As a pub landlord - like his also locally well-known father before him - he owns the Three Colts pub in Buckhurst Hill, and the Owl Pub in High Beach - both also in Epping Forest District. Recently, he has forayed into the world of celebrity boxing.[41]

40 UK Supreme Court (2025) CASE DETAILS: 'Secretary of State for the Home Department and another (Respondents) v Epping Forest District Council (Appellant)'. Available at: https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2025-0171

41 Will McCurdy (2024) 'Who is Adam Brooks? Controversial GB News panellist and Misfits boxer''. Available at: https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/people/adam-brooks-gb-news-misfits-2967968

Using the handle @EssexPR, Brooks became a national online voice on the Bell Hotel in Epping. He has established a strong follower base. As of July 2026, he has 444,000 followers on X,[42] 200,000 on Instagram,[43] and 141,000 on Facebook.[44] It is worth noting that Brooks' following on X is over ten times the size of the largest Facebook group identified in the district.

Brooks' online profile extends far beyond just discussing immigration policy. Other topics covered by Brooks online include policing, and free speech or "cancel culture" debates. He has said in a GB News interview that *"there aren't such thing as trans kids"*[45] and has been criticised by the likes of LGBTQ+ activist Thomas Willett for directly inciting violence against the LGBTQ+ community.[46]

SECTION 3
CONCLUSION

Epping Forest became the centre point of a major national debate that enveloped the town and overwhelmed its local information supply chains - a sense from local communities that their story was being written by outside voices rather than those who really lived there. This influx of people, ideas, and commentary wasn't helped by clear voids of information around the nature of the policy and the events around it, left by a collapsed local media ecosystem and a council lacking the capacity, means, or support to communicate effectively with local people.

These voids were quickly filled with speculation and unverified information shared over the web of Facebook channels and WhatsApp chats that tie the local community together and updates coming from a contentious local influencer that generated huge reach throughout the period of local unrest.

Epping Forest could have been the place where lessons were learnt and other locations around the UK got ahead of the challenges brewing, but instead it stands as an example of a people who feel largely let down by their institutions and left wanting for more sources of timely, accessible, and trustworthy information. More work is needed if local supply chains are to work for these local communities again.

42 Adam Brooks X account. Available at: https://x.com/EssexPR
43 Adam Brooks Instagram account. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/adambrooksmedia/?hl=en
44 Adam Brooks Facebook account. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/adambrooksmedia/?locale=en_GB
45 GB News (2023) 'Adam Brooks blasts BBC cancelling Róisín Murphy amid trans kids row: '99 per cent think what Róisín Murphy thinks'' Available at: https://www.gbnews.com/news/roisin-murphy-trans-row-bbc-video
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APPENDIX: THE SEVEN SEGMENTS[47]



Progressive Activists

12% of population

Highly engaged group driven by concerns about social justice. Politically active but increasingly alienated from mainstream politics. Maintain a strongly held and sometimes uncompromising approach to their beliefs.



Incrementalist Left

21% of population

Civic-minded, community-oriented, generally left-of-centre but with an aversion to the extreme; prefer gradual reform over revolution. Trust experts and institutions yet are largely tuned out of day-to-day politics.



Established Liberals

9% of population

Prosperous, confident segment who believe the system broadly works and trust experts to deliver continued progress. Strong belief in individual agency which can make them less empathetic to those who are struggling. Maintain faith in democratic processes and have a strong information-centric way of engaging with issues.



Sceptical Scrollers

10% of population

Digitally-native group whose unhappiness with social contract means they've lost faith in institutions and seek alternative sources of truth online. Shaped by experience of the Covid pandemic, they prefer individual influencers over mainstream media and are increasingly drawn to conspiratorial thinking.



Rooted Patriots

20% of population

Patriotic but politically untethered, feels abandoned and overlooked by political elites and yearns for leaders with common sense, but does not want to overthrow the system. Particularly concerned about community decline and the pressures of migration. Interventionist economics but conservative on social issues.



Traditional Conservatives

8% of population

Respectful of authority and tradition, believe in individual responsibility and established norms that have served them well. Nostalgic for the past but optimistic about the future, they deeply sceptical of many forces of change such as immigration or the path to net-zero.



Dissenting Disruptors

20% of population

Frustrated with their circumstances with an appetite for radical solutions, crave dramatic change and strong leadership. Highly distrustful of institutions, opposed to multiculturalism and feel disconnected from society. Drawn to political movements promising to overhaul status quo.

47 More in Common. '7 Segments'. Available here: https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/seven-segments/

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DEMOS

PUBLISHED BY DEMOS NOVEMBER 2026
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