

Lodge bats promised new home

by Lindsey Eudo-Mitchell.

DEMOLITION work at Christmas Lodge has begun but the building will not be destroyed completely until new homes have been built for bats living in the roof, it has been confirmed. Contractors have removed the roof of the former care home and started to take down a section that was damaged by fire in May.

Mike Hatch, of the Friends of Brickfields Country Park, which adjoins the site, was concerned that the work was being done without relevant bat checks having been completed. He said not enough communication was taking place between the council, residents and the nature reserve and said it was important they were kept up to date.

However, a spokeswoman for Hampshire County Council said the work was being done in "full agreement with English Nature" and no bat licence was needed.

Christmas Lodge suffered serious damage when it was set alight by arsonists at the beginning of May. The building, a nesting place for bats and stag beetles, lost large sections of its roof as thousands of gallons of water were pumped in to quell the flames. It was subsequently seen as a "serious health and safety risk" and the decision was taken to pull it down.

"The last time I saw it they'd started on the main building at the fire damaged end and they were removing the roof," said Mr Hatch this week. "Since then I've heard that they've got a bulldozer down there but I haven't managed to verify that yet. "If that's true then they are pressing ahead earlier than they said they would and we've heard nothing at all from them. "They said they'd get some agents in to do the bat survey, but we don't know whether that's been done, we don't know whether, if it was done, anything was recommended in it, and we don't know if they've done it."

Mr Hatch said that unless the council let people know that it was looking after specific species, like the bats, people would worry about the work being done.

The council had done little to keep interested parties informed. Mr Hatch said: "They're not talking to anyone so we don't know what's going on. We've been going at this for about two and a half years now and the communication hasn't got any better."

A spokeswoman for Hampshire County Council said that the authority had carried out a partial demolition of the fire-damaged area of Christmas Lodge on health and safety grounds and in full agreement with Natural England. "There were serious concerns that the gable wall was unstable and could collapse, especially in the deteriorating weather conditions that we have been experiencing," she said. "The safety of staff members currently carrying out asbestos removal, and the security guards, was of concern here."

She said that initial work had not required a bat licence but one was now in place and would ensure that bats living in the building were not harmed.

The spokeswoman told the Aldershot News: "One of the requirements for obtaining the bat licence was to put up alternative roosting boxes where the bats can fly once they leave the building. "The licensed bat worker will attend the site this week to make sure there are no bats left in the building. "Once this has been done and the asbestos removal is completed work will cease on site, apart from the security guard presence until the new year."

She said she would ask whether there was a way that the council could notify the Friends of Brickfields Park when anything changed so that residents could be notified.