

14 reasons to save Christmas Lodge

by Marcus Maberley

CAMPAIGNERS fear that Hampshire County Council will ignore their ideas for the future of the arson-hit Christmas Lodge site.

More than 75 people packed into St Michael's Church in Church Lane East, Aldershot, last Tuesday for a meeting to decide what they want to happen to Christmas Lodge. However, they fear that the 14 ideas they have for the gutted Evelyn Avenue building will be ignored by the Tory-run administration when they are sent to its headquarters in Winchester. They believe the county is bent on selling the site for development.

The residents' ideas for Christmas Lodge include an environment education centre, a playgroup, a cyber cafe and a museum chronicling the history of Aldershot. Mike Hatch, who chaired the meeting, said the council hasn't consulted the public fully enough about the lodge's future. "We have had no direct communication from the county council," he said. "The only thing we know from them is that they want to maximise their receipts and I know that Hampshire, like most councils, is strapped for cash."

Christmas Lodge — shut 18 months ago — was set ablaze by vandals last month.

Campaigners hope to take advantage of a government report that highlights the need for community groups to be allowed to run their own projects. The report, known as the Quirk Review, states that empty community buildings could be bought by local trusts for as little as £1.

Mr Hatch, who is chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Park, which is next to Christmas Lodge, said: "The council must have hung their heads when they saw the Quirk Review and its recommendations as I know they are desperate for funds. "We've some excellent ideas for Christmas Lodge, but it remains to be seen if we'll be listened to. "The council would be taking a backward step if it didn't consider what we have thought."

Former Rushmoor Mayor Colin Balchin, who lives near to Christmas Lodge in Rowhill Avenue, urged people to write to the council to make their case. After attending the meeting, he said: "I fear that the council will sell the lodge off for housing and I'm sure that founders Sidney and Joan Christmas would turn in their graves if they knew what has happened to their building."

Mr Balchin, who was a Conservative councillor for Manor Park — which includes Christmas Lodge — for 33 years until his retirement last year, was excited about the ideas that the meeting produced. "There were some really excellent proposals discussed," he said. "The last thing that anybody wants is a huge block of flats as there isn't the room."

"Christmas Lodge is such a valuable resource and it would be tragic if it is knocked down." Justin Coll, who lives in Aldershot, is concerned about the destruction of the town's history.

He said: "From what I have seen, the county council doesn't seem to want to listen to what the public wants or any of the ideas they have. They appear to want to ignore them and sweep their concerns under the carpet. "It's obvious that there are a lot of people in the town who are unhappy with what the council is proposing. "It seems that it has an ivory tower approach with Christmas Lodge and isn't interested in what the public have to say."

He feels that officers at the county council's headquarters in Winchester are "dictating from behind desks", adding: "It seems to me that all the council are interested in is selling Christmas Lodge off for capital receipts and that's quite sad for the whole community."

County council leader Ken Thornber confirmed that selling was the preferred option. He said the proceeds would be reinvested into adult services in the county due to a reduction in government funding. However, he dismissed claims that the public would be ignored.

"As soon as formal planning procedures begin there will be opportunities for consultation and comment on any application," he said.

He said Christmas Lodge was lying dormant because planners are waiting for issues associated with the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area to be resolved. This has virtually halted development in the Blackwater Valley. A round-the-clock security system recently installed at Christmas Lodge is intended to fulfil the council's health and safety obligations following the fire and deter vandals from causing further damage to the building, he said. He added: "These measures are constantly under review."