

Lodge can help rebuild our town

by **Marcus Maberley**

CAMPAIGNERS fighting to save a former respite home from developers have submitted a report suggesting an alternative use for the site. The Aldershot Civic Society has proposed to use the southern wing of Christmas Lodge as a meeting area for people who use the nearby Brickfields Country Park.

The society has also mooted setting up the Brickfields Environmental Sustainability Trust — a body designed to glue a “shattered” community together. Johanna Lance, chairman of the environment branch of the society, believes the proposal will benefit the town’s residents.

“We need something to rebuild this community that is so shattered, and I believe that this could be the answer,” she said. “We really get the impression from people that civic pride has been lost in this area and this is a real opportunity to get that back. “How can people be proud when they don’t have that much to be really proud of? It seems that people have a fatalistic attitude after being ignored over so many things.”

The home was closed in December 2005 in a move that has caused uproar among those living in the area and the vulnerable people who depended on the facility. However, Ms Lance remained optimistic that Hampshire County Council would listen to the society’s ideas. She said: “I very sincerely expect the council to work with us and to look at the issues. That’s the bottom line and I really hope that we will be able to work together to find a viable solution. “It appears that the public aren’t ever listened to properly and aren’t given a proper voice on this type of issue.”

Ms Lance cited public opposition to the redevelopment of the Manor Park Annexe site in 2002 as an example of people’s concerns being ignored. “There was uproar with the plans there and yet the building work still went ahead — now look at it. It has ruined the appearance of the park,” she said.

“We want to get people thinking about what is going on around them and make them realise that green spaces like the Christmas Lodge site are few and far between.”

Mike Hatch, chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Country Park, welcomed the society’s idea. He said: “I think it will be absolutely ideal for everybody who uses Brickfields Park and do believe that it’s a viable option. “The whole site needs to get used and it looks like an ideal community project.

“I know that the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership need offices and we don’t have anywhere for visitors to the park to use toilets and we’re relying on other people’s goodwill for storage.”

He said that without competition authorities would carry on with proposals regardless, and that there should be an environmental survey done to assess any possible impact of housing. “I hope that the council will take this seriously and have it as part of their agenda,” he said. “If they do decide to knock Christmas Lodge down I hope they don’t stick up 30 houses, as the traffic levels would increase and it would be completely ridiculous. “We don’t want the land to be squandered and redeveloped as it would harm the environment.”

A spokesman from Hampshire County Council said the authority understood that any planning applications regarding residential schemes in Rushmoor were on hold due to an appeal initiated by Natural England. Natural England has effectively frozen residential development due to concerns over the potential impact that more housing may have on three species of bird.

The spokesman added: “Hampshire County Council will keep all options open for the disposal of the property with a view to securing capital receipts for reinvestment in our adult services facilities. “As the planning authority, Rushmoor Borough Council would look to ensure that appropriate consultation is conducted with the local residents on emerging development proposals relating to Christmas Lodge. “This will give residents the opportunity to air their views about the future of the site and all angles will be fully considered as part of the development process.”