

## **Lodge 'should be retirement complex'**

Residents living near to a demolished care home say that if the site is turned into a retirement complex they will sell their houses and move there.

Controversy has dogged the former Christmas Lodge nursing home ever since arsonists struck last May. Campaigners had fought for the retention of the fire-damaged building — which closed its doors in 2005 — and mooted it being turned into a community facility.

Owners Hampshire County Council decided to bulldoze the property, but have so far failed to unveil concrete plans for the site. People living nearby feel the adjacent, picturesque Brickfields Country Park would be an ideal backdrop to a retirement home.

Denise McAllister, who lives in nearby Evelyn Avenue, wants answers about Christmas Lodge.

“It seems as though nothing’s really been done there since January when it was knocked down,” she said. “I would not want another nursing home there but something like a retirement complex, as residents would be able to enjoy the park next door. It would be perfect as it would be next door to Brickfields, which is such a beautiful place.”

Concerns were raised in January by residents that the site could become a magnet for antisocial behaviour. However, that problem seems to have been averted by fencing and a large concrete slab blocking the entrance.

“I think the council have done really well preventing anything nasty happening here,” Mrs McAllister, an Evelyn Avenue resident for a decade, said. “I thought gypsies might be attracted to the site but they can’t access the site because of the concrete block.”

A retirement home appeals to many of Mrs McAllister’s elderly neighbours. “We’ve been chatting and some have even said they’d sell up and move there,” the 52-year-old said.

Elizabeth Richardson, of Jubilee Road, which looks out over the Christmas Lodge site, is one of those who would consider selling her house and moving to a retirement home there. “It’s such a picturesque spot and I think it would be ideal,” she said. “There was a lot of furore when Christmas Lodge closed and was then attacked by arsonists.

“I think the community would like to know what’s going on. I think everybody here would welcome it if it was turned into something like a residential home for the elderly.”

Colin Balchin, who opened the park when Mayor of Rushmoor in 1984, is part of the Friends of Brickfields Park, a group concerned with preserving the green oasis. “It would be an excellent idea to have a retirement complex built there,” he said. “It would be much better than 40-50 flats because there would be less traffic in the area. “I don’t know if the infrastructure would be able to cope with people moving into the flats as there would be so many more vehicles on the road.”

Mr Balchin, a Rushmoor councillor for 33 years before his 2006 retirement, was one of those who attended an emergency residents’ meeting held last June to discuss a viable way forward for Christmas Lodge.

“We were all very, very concerned about what would happen to it following the fire,” he added. “It’s now been demolished but I think taking advantage of the park next door by building a retirement home would be ideal. Maybe a link could be built from any such home to the park to give residents full access to what is an excellent facility.”

A county council spokeswoman said: “Our plans for the Christmas Lodge site have always been to secure capital receipts that we can reinvest back into adult services and facilities for older people and the vulnerable.

“When proposals are fully developed and formal planning procedures can be commenced, there will be opportunities for consultation and comment on any planning application.”