

New hope to utilise lodge for the community

by **Marcus Maberley**

CAMPAIGNERS fighting to save fire-damaged Christmas Lodge from bulldozers are aiming to set up a trust to buy the building. Vandals set the former nursing home ablaze earlier this month threatening dreams of turning it into a community centre as it could be deemed structurally unsafe. Despite the building being badly damaged, there is still a ray of hope for those wanting to retain the site for the benefit of the town.

They are hoping to use a recently published document — The Quirk Review — that calls for community organisations to take ownership of disused council buildings. The report, produced by Lewisham Council's chief executive Barry Quirk, addresses the barriers that might stand in the way of communities managing and owning council assets. Launched last week by communities' minister Ruth Kelly MP, the report is seen as a tool to help neighbourhoods improve their local economy and environment.

"The report argues that the role of local government should be about enabling people and communities to take control," Ms Kelly said. "It recognises that sometimes solutions generated from within communities are more effective than those handed down from Whitehall — or indeed a town hall."

Christmas Lodge is owned by Hampshire County Council, which has carried out a structural survey that will determine if the building is demolished or repaired. A meeting has been organised by Mike Hatch, chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Park, which is next to Christmas Lodge, to gather public opinion about what the community wants to do with the building. "If we can use the Quirk Review to our advantage then there's hope yet," Mr Hatch said. "If we can set up a trust and create a community building run by the community it will be beneficial for the town. "Hopefully the community will have some great ideas and be able to take us forward."

"The building has been empty for far too long and nothing has been done with it. It was almost an invitation for vandals. "There isn't much for people to do in the town and we're frequently being told in the park that people want something positive done with it, rather than just flats." He said the building could be an ideal environmental haven for people wanting to become greener. "As it is south facing you could put solar panels on it and use it as a demonstration building for people," he said.

While admitting the group faced a difficult task, he added: "It is not insurmountable as there's only a hole in the roof and damage to one wing. "Windsor Castle was virtually devastated and that was rebuilt, so I don't see why Christmas Lodge can't be." A report discussing potential uses for the building and why it should not be pulled down was compiled by the Aldershot Civic Society in February.

Society chairman Johanna Lance said the meeting was an opportunity to test the water. "We're treating it as a public consultation and see if there are any ideas that we can take further," she explained. "I was extremely angered by the mindless hooligans who set fire to Christmas Lodge. "Fortunately only one part of it is badly damaged but we haven't been allowed to look inside and really survey the extent of it."

She said that if Christmas Lodge was to go, it would be depriving the public of their right to nature. The building is a nesting area for rare species of bats, but Ms Lance fears its removal could spell the end for many species of wildlife in the town. "You don't know when getting rid of one animal could have a devastating effect on the nature chain," she said. "It could be a domino effect and that would be a real tragedy. "There are very few green spaces left in this area — Christmas Lodge could be somewhere that people could go to and enjoy the outside."

The views gathered from the meeting — which will be held at St Michael's Church in Church Lane East on June 5 at 7.30pm — will be put to the council by the campaigners.

County council leader Ken Thornber said: "No formal response can yet be given about the disposal of Christmas Lodge to the community because we have not yet received any approach. "However, our plans for the site have always been to secure capital receipts that we can reinvest back into adult services and facilities for older people and the vulnerable, and there will be opportunities for consultation and comment on any application once the planning procedures begin."