

Christmas Lodge plea: Give us a say

by Andrew Milford.

CAMPAIGNERS furious at plans to demolish Christmas Lodge are asking for a chance to have their say on the future of the site before it is too late. The former care home, owned by Hampshire County Council, suffered serious damage in an arson attack at the beginning of May. The building, which was a nesting place for bats and stag beetles, lost large sections of the roof as gallons of water were pumped in to quell the flames. It is now seen as a "serious health and safety risk" and will be pulled down in September, at the latest.

However, members of CLECT — the Christmas Lodge Environmental Community Trust — are unhappy with this state of affairs and want their say on the part of the site that was left undamaged by the blaze.

Johanna Lance is vice chairman of CLECT, as well as a member of Aldershot Civic Society. "Last week, the immediate neighbours of the site received notification that the demolition of the lodge was to take place on or about August 20, 2007," she told the News.

"We are very concerned that the required public consultation over the future use of Christmas Lodge will become meaningless if the buildings are demolished prior to the consultation being carried out as part of the planning process, as Hampshire County Council has previously stated.

"Since the north wing has not been damaged by the fire, it cannot be regarded as 'unsafe' and there can be no reason as to why that building should not be retained until after the proper planning process and the public consultation have been carried out." Mrs Lance has now sent a letter to Liz Duffin in the county council's property, business and regulatory services department to clarify the situation.

In June, more than 75 people packed into St Michael's Church in Church Lane East for a meeting to decide what they wanted to happen to Christmas Lodge. Ideas for the site included an environment education centre, a playgroup, an internet café and a museum chronicling the history of Aldershot. Those campaigning for keeping Christmas Lodge as a long-stay residential care home had previously presented a 4,000-strong petition to Hampshire County Council.

The home was closed in December 2005 in a move that caused uproar among those living in the area and the vulnerable people depending on the facility.

Christmas Lodge is not the only home to have suffered in Rushmoor. Courtbourn Older Persons Home, the only council-run care home in Farnborough, was forced to close after councillors decided not to invest more than £1.2 million on improvements.

County council leader Ken Thornber said: "We are aware of the Aldershot Civic Society's concerns regarding our proposal to demolish the buildings following the recent fire. "The condition of the buildings on the site now pose a serious health and safety risk, which is exacerbated by the threat of trespassers and vandals trying to gain access to the property. "It is important that we make safety our top priority, which is why we have issued the appropriate statutory notices advising of our intention to demolish the buildings. "This decision does not affect our plans for the site disposal, which is part of the county council's reinvestment strategy for adult care services in the community.

"The county council fully accepts the need for consultation as part of the normal planning process as and when plans are developed for any future use of this site."