

## **'LET US HAVE HOME TO USE'**

Rebecca Connop Price reports

THE future of a former care home in Aldershot is once again in the spotlight after a group of community-spirited residents launched a last-ditch bid to save it from demolition. At a public meeting on Tuesday, members of the Friends of Brickfields Country Park and the Aldershot Civic Society announced their intention to form a trust in order to take control of Christmas Lodge, off Evelyn Avenue.

Mike Hatch, chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Country Park, told the meeting that forming a trust would prevent the site, which is adjacent to Brickfields Country Park, from being sold off for housing. Mr Hatch has been spurred on by a recent government announcement which highlighted the need for community groups to be allowed to run their own projects.

Local government minister Ruth Kelly said councils should make an effort to hand control of some of its assets to community groups. Empty community buildings, such as Christmas Lodge, could be handed over to groups for as little as £1. In a report, she said: "There are clear benefits to local groups owning or managing community assets – such as village halls, community centres, building preservation trusts and community enterprises. "Community ownership can bring people from different backgrounds together. It can foster a sense of belonging. It can play a role in enhancing the local environment, alleviating poverty and raising people's aspirations."

Hampshire County Council closed Christmas Lodge, a care home for the elderly, in November 2005 after council bosses decided it would be too costly to bring the building up to current standards. Since then, the building has remained empty. A recent arson attack on the home highlighted its vulnerability. The county council has said it will likely seek to build houses on the site. But it is thought planning applications have been delayed because of concerns about protected birds and bats in the area. The adjacent Brickfields Country Park is home to five known protected species.

However, Rushmoor Council, the planning authority, has decided to adopt a new approach to dealing with objections made on the grounds that protected species will be disturbed. Their new approach is designed to allow more planning applications to be decided on merit – rather than ditched as soon as Natural England objects to them.

Mr Hatch said Rushmoor's new policy meant it was a worrying time for the people who want to keep the building open for community use. He said: "We have to move with some urgency. I think we've been quite lucky that they haven't built on the site already."

Colin Balchin, a former councillor who was mayor when Brickfields Country Park was opened 25 years ago, gave up the evening of his 73rd birthday to attend the meeting. Afterwards, he told the Star: "I intend to do what I can to support the group."