

Bats may prevent old home rebuild

by Lindsey Eudo-Mitchell

STRUCTURAL surveys will be undertaken as Hampshire County Council moves to 'dispose' of Christmas Lodge as quickly as possible following a fire in the empty building. But any plans to demolish the building could have a tough job getting permission with Natural England ready to step in to protect rare bats. The former care home has been vacant since December 2005 when it was shut in a bid to save money.

Having stood empty for more than a year the home became a target for arsonists earlier this month prompting concerns of further attacks on the derelict building. The building is a nesting place for bats, which have European protection, and stag beetles. Campaigners hoped to use that as a trump card in the fight against new development.

But Johanna Lance, chairman of Aldershot Civic Society said: "Again local campaigners have been robbed, not only of a valuable argument in the planning process, but also of protected creatures that they have been working very hard to preserve. "Bat populations within the urban areas of the borough are already small and the loss of yet another colony could easily lead to a complete loss in this part of Aldershot"

Val Pollard of Natural England said if bats were using the building to nest everything possible would be done to protect them. She said: "Generally when a planning application goes in and there are special protection issues Natural England are statutory consultees. Although bats are protected there is a licence developers can get so that activities can be carried out lawfully.

"But if there are bats living in the building they would have to be considered as what's called a material consideration, as they are protected under European law. "It's not just the bats that are protected either, it's also their shelter and places of rest." She said that once a planning application had been submitted Natural England would send somebody to prepare a bat report.

Ken Thornber, leader of the council said the fire highlighted the vulnerability of the building and showed why its disposal needed to be completed as quickly as possible.

But blocks on residential development in Rushmoor have left the council unable to do anything until the publication of the South-East Plan examination panel report into the potential impacts of residential developments in the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area.

A spokeswoman for the council confirmed that contractors had been sent to secure the building and fence the area off as soon as the fire was out. She said they would return to remove loose material, after which a full examination of the building will be carried out. The results of that survey could decide whether the building now has to be demolished completely or repaired.

The council spokeswoman said that a report written by Aldershot Civic Society had been considered and a response provided. The response made it clear that priority would be given to securing capital receipts from the sale of the property with homes the most likely outcome, with the part of the site included in Brickfields Park to remain as open space. "When formal planning procedures can be started there will be opportunities for consultation and comment.

"Meanwhile, in light of community interest in the future of the site, the borough council has been preparing a planning brief to identify the opportunities and constraints associated with the redevelopment options."