

'Demolish home or arsonists could strike again'

A FORMER nursing home could again fall prey to arsonists unless owners Hampshire County Council knock it down, according to those who campaigned to save it from the bulldozers. Two months on from the original demolition date, Christmas Lodge still stands dormant. Campaigners and residents also fear that the council could be hatching a development plan that might encroach on the neighbouring wildlife-rich Brickfields Park.

The nursing home was closed in December 2005 to save money and was set alight by vandals in May, prompting the council to declare it "a serious health and safety risk". A narrow alleyway that skirts boarded-up Christmas Lodge has now become a magnet for graffiti artists since the home closed, residents say.

Despite a torrent of public opposition, a 4,000-signature petition and the presentation of a string of possible community uses for Christmas Lodge to the council from campaigners led by Mike Hatch, chairman of the Friends of Brickfields Park, officials in Winchester decided to raze the building.

Mr Hatch said: "I'm quite surprised that it has not been demolished, as I thought the date had been set for August 20 for that to happen. There was a huge amount of opposition to their plans but unfortunately our ideas fell on deaf ears. "We did look into taking legal action but the costs of getting lawyers were horrendous. We've come up against a brick wall really."

Mr Hatch has had meetings with the council and has been assured that whatever is in store for the site won't affect the park, which houses more than 250 species of flora and fauna and is a haven for a range of butterfly species.

"I would be extremely disappointed and upset if any development did cause problems for the park and I think another campaign would have to be launched if it did," he said. "I'd now like to see the land Christmas Lodge is on incorporated into the park, rather than having anything built there."

Tessa Kirk, who lives in nearby Highfield Gardens, is concerned that vandals could once again torch Christmas Lodge. "It now needs to be knocked down," the 65-year-old said. "I've noticed lots of graffiti around here recently and it's about time the council did what they said they would."

Mrs Kirk is also worried that any development might encroach on Brickfields Country Park. "I really hope that the park isn't affected," Mrs Kirk, who has lived in the area for a decade, said. "It's such a quiet place to go for a walk and it would be a huge shame if any development affected that as there's so much beautiful wildlife."

Jenny Blackman, of Ayjay Close, often walks her dog through the alleyway that splits Southmead Road and the doomed former care home. The 46-year-old said: "I signed the petition to try to save Christmas Lodge but the county council have made its decision to knock it down. Yet it still stands. "I know it's been torched once and if it stays boarded up like this, it could happen again. There's only a flimsy fence all around it and I'd imagine that it would be easy to get over. It's time the council did what it decided to do."

A county council spokesman said demolition work should begin in December after a delay caused by the discovery of a colony of bats. "We have appointed specialist environmental consultants to advise us on the management and monitoring of any work that we propose to do," she explained. "We share the concern about the potential for future arson attacks which is why we are continuing with the arrangements for security guards. "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..

"No development proposals have yet been submitted to the planning authority but we anticipate being able to pursue options that will enable that part of the Christmas Lodge site that is included in the Brickfields Park, to remain as part of the open space. "When formal planning procedures can be commenced, there will be opportunities for consultation and comment on any planning application submitted to Rushmoor Borough Council."