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Famous 16th Century Surrey pub saved, for now?

5 November 2023

A 16th century pub in the heart of the **Surrey Hills** has been saved from developers after plans to convert one of the last remaining Abinger watering holes into houses, holiday-let pods, and a new bar area were thrown out.

Mole Valley Borough Council's planning committee met on Wednesday, November 1 to hear proposals from developers, **JPW Osprey**, to turn the Volunteer pub in Sutton Abinger, near Dorking into self-catered holiday lets.

The plans were voted down eight to six as councillors sided with resident groups, formed to save the pub, as well as **Abinger Parish Council** which had lodged formal objections.

Addressing the meeting was **Paul Clever** who was part of a community group that had raised £600,000 in a failed bid to purchase the pub and save it. He said: "The aim of this application is to close the Volunteer, replace it with an unviable alternative which gets through planning. The new entity will last as long as needed to prove that it is not viable and the developer will then sell the asset for multiples of what it cost."

He added: "The Volunteer is being closed and the new layout and proposed service will ensure the new venture in the new area will fail. The planning application and the planning report refer to the pub being unviable and that is simply not true. The Volunteer Community Group has proof of this for the year preceding the sale, during the worst trading conditions ever for publicans.

"The Volunteer is viable and very precious to its community, known far beyond the boundaries of Surrey. It should not be allowed to go the way of so many other pubs near and far, especially when there are so many people willing and able to make it work as a public house and community facility."

The pub sits on the western side of Water Lane within the hamlet of Sutton Abinger, close to the boundary with Guildford. The land is designated Metropolitan Green Belt, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Area of Great Landscape Value.

The surroundings, the officer report said, "lend the pub an engaging verdant setting and areas of the garden afford views over rolling wooded countryside to the south taking in attractive historic properties, some of which are listed."

The Volunteer had been owned and operated by the Dorset-based brewery, Hall and Woodhouse, until 2022 when it closed and sold to the applicant.

In Novermber 2022 the pub was listed as an Asset of Community Value having been nominated by the Abinger Community Pub Group as a building that furthers the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community.

Speaking on behalf of the the application was **Simon Best** who told the meeting it was the best way of bringing the pub back in use. He said: "Change is not always a bad thing and it is clear from previous failures that diversification is needed to ensure the Volunteer can run as a viable entity. Holiday lets will support and enable the pub to continue."

Councillor **Margaret Cooksey**, who moved that the plans be rejected said: "If they kept the public house building as is and used what is going to be the extension as accommodation that would have made much more sense. They have got it the wrong way round. It would have been better a different way round and hope they take note of that and come back with a better proposal next time round."

She added: "They've got it horribly wrong".

Image: The Volunteer Pub (Mark Davison)

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