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Cllr Steve Jarvis
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Dear Cllr Jarvis,

We are responding to the statutory consultation on the proposed closure of Albury C of E VA Primary School, following the Cabinet's February decision to proceed to this stage.

Since the beginning of this process, we have continued to meet with parents, residents and more, and our position remains consistent: Albury is a much-loved rural school providing a high standard of education, which plays a central role in village life and must be retained for children at school now, and future generations.

The Council's own Consultation-Outcome report is clear.

96.1% of all respondents to the previous consultation opposed the closure proposal — an exceptionally clear expression of community sentiment that must be given substantial weight at this statutory stage. Anything to the contrary is undemocratic.

As we have consistently argued, it is essential that this process be paused and Albury Primary School be afforded the same opportunity as others, to implement a recovery plan.

This is for the following reasons:

1. Consultation-driven uncertainty has directly caused falling roll numbers

At the start of this academic year, Albury had 49 pupils. As set out in our previous submission, the announcement of potential closure triggered a sharp decline, as families moved children or avoided applying to a school facing an uncertain future. The Consultation-Outcome report acknowledges that pupil numbers had fallen to around 21 pupils by the time of the panel meeting.

These figures do not reflect underlying demand. They reflect the predictable and well-understood phenomenon of consultation-induced destabilisation. It would be both



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inaccurate and unfair to use numbers that have collapsed *because of* the Council's own process as justification to complete that process.

A pause to restore stability remains the only way to understand the school's true viability.

2. Time and stability remain essential to secure a sustainable future

Albury offers a distinctive rural, community-centred and faith-based education that families value deeply. With stability restored, the school can market its strengths, particularly to families in nearby villages and to new housing areas such as in Bishop's Stortford.

The Council has given such stabilisation periods to other small rural schools facing similar pressures — such as Sandon — and it is only consistent and fair that Albury be given the same opportunity.

3. Impacts extend beyond Albury — including federation and SEND considerations

The school's federation with Puller Memorial Primary School means the implications of closure extend immediately beyond a single site. Closure risks destabilising both schools and does so at a time when rural educational resilience is already under strain.

The Consultation-Outcome report also recognises concerns raised by families about the needs of specific groups of pupils — including the several children with EHCPs currently on roll. These children would face disruption and uncertainty at a time when consistency and stability are particularly important. The Council is obliged to consider equality and SEND-related consequences carefully when making statutory decisions.

4. Financial considerations still weigh against closure

As noted previously, the school has a £250,000 deficit that has not grown over the past year. It has never been disputed that the deficit must be addressed. We have clear evidence of other village schools with small rolls that are not in deficit, and there is no intrinsic reason why the same could not be achieved for Albury.

The Council has been presented with a false dichotomy: either continue exactly as things are or proceed to total closure. There are credible alternative routes to addressing the deficit — including restructuring — which have not been meaningfully explored. Moreover, the energy and determination with which the community has rallied around Albury School



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demonstrates the strength that could be harnessed to secure long-term financial sustainability, if Hertfordshire County Council were willing to work with parents and the village rather than imposing a decision at short notice.

Providing an additional year for the school to stabilise presents minimal financial risk and offers a realistic chance of avoiding a six-figure loss to the public purse. By contrast, rushing to closure now guarantees both the deficit write-off and the longer-term social and economic costs of declining rural capacity. The Council's own estimate shows that closure at this stage will cost at least £500,000, which would represent a deeply irresponsible misuse of public funds by the Liberal Democrat administration at County Hall.

5. Presumption against closure of rural schools

The national guidance is clear with the presumption against the closure of rural schools, meaning closure should only occur when all viable alternatives have been fully explored and the case for closure is demonstrably strong.

The Department for Education states that decision-makers must consider all options such as restructuring, and other cost-sharing measures, before closure is even contemplated. Parliament has reinforced this, emphasising that rural schools sit “at the heart of their communities” and that alternatives to closure must be considered first.

This has not happened at Albury. No formal restructuring has taken place. Closure without undertaking even the basic steps required represents a clear failure to meet the presumption and a dereliction of the responsibilities placed on local authorities when considering rural schools.

6. Albury has a proven history of resilience

More than 30 years ago, Albury was judged unviable with only 15 pupils — yet it went on to thrive again for decades. With the right support, the school can do so once more. The community has shown its willingness to play its part, it is about time County Council did too.

What is needed now is time, stability, and a commitment from the Council to work collaboratively with the school, not prematurely close it.

7. New Government Funding Changes the Picture Substantially



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Since this closure process began, the Government has announced new funding that substantially alters the financial context for Hertfordshire. Notably, ministers are investing £1.6 billion in a new Inclusive Mainstream Fund over three years to support schools to deliver stronger universal SEND provision and ensure high-quality teaching for children with additional needs. This investment is specifically designed to help mainstream schools better support pupils with SEND — a group that forms a significant proportion of Albury's roll.

Alongside this, the Government has moved to address historic SEND pressures by writing off 90% of Hertfordshire County Council's SEND deficit, amounting to £80m. This delivers major savings in interest amounting to millions alone, immediately improving the Council's financial position.

At long last the national picture for education funding is changing for the better. It would be a tragedy to close Albury Primary School at the very moment the national funding landscape is improving. The Government is providing substantial financial support to Hertfordshire County Council. The money is there. Use it.

Conclusion

In light of the 96.1% opposition recorded in the Council's own consultation, the consultation-driven collapse in pupil numbers, the clear risks to federation and SEND pupils, and the wider pattern of rural-school concerns across Hertfordshire, it is clear that the evidential threshold for closure as required under the presumption has not been met.

We therefore urge Hertfordshire County Council to halt the statutory process, allow *at least* one full academic year for stabilisation and recovery planning, and work constructively with the school community to explore the alternatives required by national guidance.

Albury Primary School is a 150-year-old anchor of rural life. To close it now, and on data distorted by the Council's own actions, would be premature, unnecessary, and profoundly damaging. It is imperative that the Council change course.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Hinchliff MP

Member of Parliament for North East Hertfordshire

Josh Dean MP

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