



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

DETERMINATION

Case reference: VAR733

Admission Authority: Hampshire County Council for Poulner Infant School, Ringwood.

Date of decision: 25 September 2017

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the variation to the admission arrangements determined by Hampshire County Council for Poulner Infant School, Ringwood.

I determine that for admissions in September 2018 the published admission number (PAN) shall be 60.

The referral

1. Hampshire County Council (the local authority) has referred a variation to the Adjudicator about the admission arrangements for Poulner Infant School (the school), a community school for pupils aged seven to eleven, for September 2018. The variation is a reduction to 60 from the determined PAN of 75.

Jurisdiction

2. The referral was made to me in accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) which states that:

“where an admission authority (a) have in accordance with section 88C determined the admission arrangements which are to apply for a particular school year, but (b) at any time before the end of that year consider that the arrangements should be varied in view of a major change in circumstances occurring since they were so determined, the authority must [except in a case where the authority’s proposed variations fall within any description of variations prescribed for the purposes of this section] (a) refer their proposed variations to the adjudicator, and (b) notify the appropriate bodies of the proposed variations”.

I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.

Procedure

3. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation, guidance and the School Admissions Code.
4. The documents I have considered in reaching my decision include:
 - (i) the local authority's form of referral of 23 August 2017 and supporting documents;
 - (ii) the determined arrangements for September 2018 and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
 - (iii) a copy of the local authority's booklet for parents seeking admission to schools in the area in September 2017;
 - (iv) a copy of the letter notifying the appropriate bodies about the proposed variation;
 - (v) evidence that the local authority had consulted the governing body of the school before making the variation request; and
 - (vi) forecasts of pupil numbers for the area for September 2018 and subsequent years.

Background and consideration of factors

5. In January 2017 the local authority determined its admission arrangements for the 2018/19 academic year, including the PAN for all community and voluntary controlled schools in Hampshire. The PAN for Poulner Infant School, which is in the town of Ringwood, was set at 75.
6. The school has been undersubscribed in recent years. In September 2016 and 2017, the numbers of children admitted were 54 and 62 respectively. The local authority forecasts indicate that 56 children will require a place at the school in September 2018. At a meeting of the school's governing body held on 11 July 2017, the implications of these figures were discussed. It was considered not to be financially sustainable for the school to operate with three classes in the reception year. This would be necessary if the number of children admitted in 2018 were to exceed 60, in order to comply with the regulations relating to the size of infant classes. The governing body agreed to ask the local authority, as the admission authority for the school, to seek a variation to its admission arrangements. The local authority says that the reduction in PAN,

“will enable the governing body to put firm financial plans in place on the basis that they will not be required to employ additional teachers for this intake.”

7. The local authority's population forecast for Ringwood indicates that there will be 220 children living in the area who will require a place in the reception year in September 2018. Typically, the “participation rate”

for the schools across Ringwood as a whole is 103 per cent, that is, the total number of children admitted slightly exceeds the number of resident children. The combined PANs of the schools in the area that admit children into the reception year currently stands at 241; if this request for a variation were to be approved, this figure would reduce to 226.

8. Therefore, the effect of a reduction of PAN at Poulner Infant School to the figure requested is likely to be that there will be a very close match between the number of children whose parents the local authority expects to seek a place at a school in the Ringwood area in September 2018 and the number of places available. This allows for very little margin for error in the local authority's forecasts and raises the possibility that it might be difficult for a school place to be provided within a reasonable distance of every child's home. When I expressed this concern to the local authority, I was given a degree of re-assurance that it would,

“endeavour to provide accommodation should more than the 220 Hampshire children wish to seek a place for the 2018/19 year of intake.”

9. I recognise that, financially, a reduction in PAN to 60 will be highly advantageous for the school, but this must not be at the expense of parents and children who, as a result, may find that obtaining a local school place becomes very challenging. I am satisfied that the local authority has taken this into account in making this request for a variation in the school's PAN. Close monitoring of the demand for places will be necessary.
10. In accordance with paragraph 3.6 of the School Admissions Code, the local authority has informed the appropriate bodies of its proposal to reduce the PAN. No responses have been received.

Conclusion

11. A reduction in the PAN of the school from 75 to 60 will allow it to operate with two classes in the reception year, avoiding the need to have three small classes, which would be financially unsustainable. The local authority's forecasts indicate that the demand for places at the school in September 2018 will be fewer than 60, although across the Ringwood area, there will be very little surplus capacity. Careful management by the local authority should ensure that all children in the area can obtain a school place within a reasonable distance of their home. For these reasons I approve the variation requested.

Determination

12. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the variation to the admission arrangements determined by Hampshire County Council for Poulner Infant School, Ringwood.

13. I determine that for admissions in September 2018 the published admission number (PAN) shall be 60.

Dated: 25 September 2017

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Peter Goringe