



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2271

Admission authority: The governing board for Finchampstead Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School, Wokingham

Date of decision: 29 September 2022

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by the governing board for Finchampstead Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School for September 2023.

I determine that the school's catchment area shall be enlarged to cover the whole of the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead and California.

The referral

1. The governing board for Finchampstead Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School (the school) has referred a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for September 2023 (the arrangements) for the school to the adjudicator. The school is a voluntary aided school for children aged 4 to 11 in Finchampstead in the Wokingham local authority (the LA) area.
2. The proposed variation is to extend the school's catchment area, which currently covers part of the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead and California, so that it encompasses all of the ecclesiastical parish.

Jurisdiction and procedure

3. The referral was made to me in accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) which deals with variations to determined arrangements. Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the School Admissions Code (the Code) say (in so far as relevant here):

“3.6 Once admission arrangements have been determined for a particular school year, they cannot be revised by the admission authority unless such revision is necessary to give effect to a mandatory requirement of this Code, admissions law, a determination of the Adjudicator or any misprint in the admission arrangements. Admission authorities may propose other variations where they consider such changes to be necessary in view of a major change in circumstances. Such proposals **must** be referred to the Schools Adjudicator for approval, and the appropriate bodies notified. Where the local authority is the admission authority for a community or voluntary controlled school, it must consult the governing body of the school before making any reference.

3.7 Admission authorities **must** notify the appropriate bodies of all variations”.

4. The governing board has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am also satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation, and the Code.

5. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:

- a. the referral from the governing board dated 8 August 2022, supporting documents and further information provided at my request;
- b. the determined arrangements for 2023 and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
- c. comments on the proposed variation from the LA and the Diocese of Oxford (the diocese), which is the school’s religious authority; and
- d. a map showing the location of the school and other relevant schools.

The proposed variation

6. The governing board proposes to extend the school’s catchment area from the present ‘old village’ part of the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead and California to the whole of the ecclesiastical parish, including an area of new housing being created in Finchampstead in a development known as Finchwood Park. It would be necessary to insert a new map of the catchment area within the arrangements and to amend the wording that describes the catchment area.

7. Paragraph 3.6 of the Code (as above) requires that admission arrangements, once determined, may only be revised, that is changed or varied, if there is a major change of circumstance or in certain other limited and specified circumstances. I will consider below whether the variation requested is justified by the change in circumstances.

Consideration of proposed variation

8. The school has a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 17 and is arranged in four classes. Table One shows the number of children in each year group at the school in September 2022.

Table One: Number of children in each year group (September 2022)

Year group	YR	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Number of children	7	17	17	16	15	17	17

Table One shows that there was a significant reduction in the admission of children in September 2022. Having been fully subscribed, or very nearly so, for the previous six years, the school admitted only seven children into the reception class.

9. In its request for a variation to its admission arrangements, the governing board explains that the re-location and unforeseen enlargement of a neighbouring school is the cause of this reduction in admissions. Map One shows the locations of schools in the area.

Map One: Primary schools within the boundaries of the Finchampstead & California Ecclesiastical Parish and the Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location



10. The Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location (the SDL) is a large residential development, planned to comprise 3,500 new homes. Farley Hill Primary School was re-located from a nearby village to the SDL area. Its PAN for admission in September 2022 was determined as 30 but, in fact, 60 children were admitted. The governing board

says that this was a result of “pressure from parents living in the new houses around the school but whose children were denied school places.” Farley Hill Primary School’s new premises are able to accommodate 420 children, that is, 60 in each year group.

11. The governing board’s request for a variation continues,

“The immediate effect of Farley Hill Primary School increasing its new starter intake for Sept 22 from 30 to 60 has been a reduction in places offered in surrounding schools, including ourselves.”

It describes the consequent effect on the school’s budget as “drastic and unsustainable.” The governing board explains that the reduction is a result of parents from the Arborfield area enrolling their children at the re-located Farley Hill School, rather than at Finchampstead CEVA Primary School. It concludes that the result of this change in local circumstances will be that,

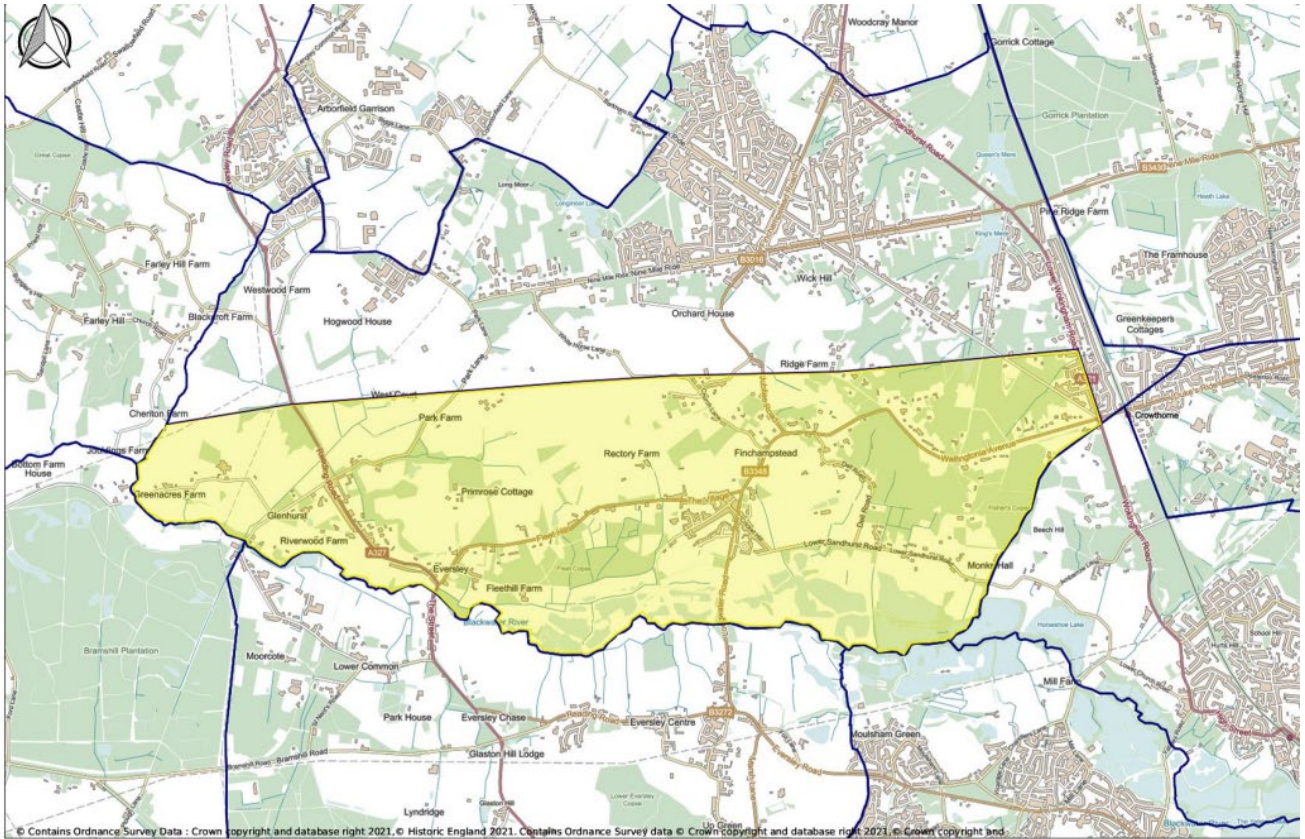
“we will no longer be able to rely on the number of families from the Arborfield area that over the last few years have taken a good proportion of our Reception places”.

12. The governing board’s proposal is to vary its admission arrangements by extending its catchment area. The oversubscription criteria in the determined arrangements for admission in September 2023 can be summarised as follows:

- (i) Looked after children and previously looked after children.
- (ii) Children living in the catchment area with exceptional social or medical needs,
- (iii) Children living in the catchment area with a sibling at the school.
- (iv) Other children living in the catchment area.
- (v) Children living outside the catchment area with a parent who is a regular worshipper at the parish church and a sibling at the school.
- (vi) Children living outside the catchment area with a sibling at the school.
- (vii) Children living outside the catchment area with a parent who is a regular worshipper at the parish church.
- (viii) Children living outside the catchment area with exceptional social or medical needs.
- (ix) Other children.

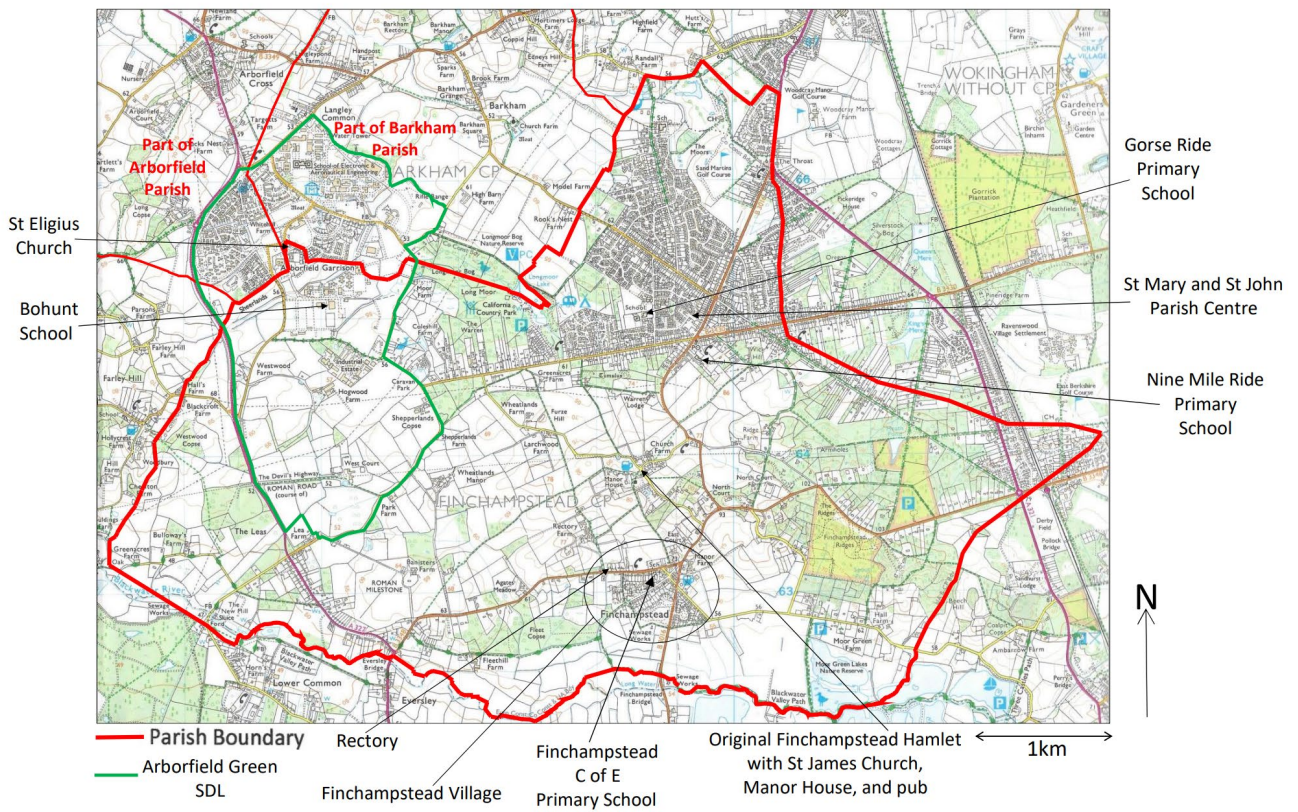
13. Map Two shows the current extent of the catchment area (shaded in yellow) and Map Three the proposed enlarged catchment area (bordered in red).

Map Two: Current catchment area of the school



Map Three: Proposed enlarged catchment area

Finchampstead and California Parish



14. The governing board points out that the enlarged catchment area matches the extent of the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead and California and is therefore “in line with the school’s Trust deed, to serve the local population of the parish.” It says that the number of children living in the existing catchment area (the village of Finchampstead) has fallen significantly in recent years. The board’s justification for the enlargement is set out in its request for a variation as follows:

“As more of the proposed 1500 houses are built in the southern part of the Arborfield Garrison SDL, all in the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead & California, this will increasingly be the homes of the ‘local children’ for which the church bought the school. This new housing area is known as Finchwood Park, Finchampstead; the houses are built and marketed as being in Finchampstead and the residents identify strongly with being part of Finchampstead; yet at present the designated schools for families living there are the two Arborfield schools and not a Finchampstead school. With our proposed variation giving the certainty of being ‘catchment’, we would expect more parish families to put Finchampstead Church of England (aided) Primary School as their first preference and therefore more or all of our 17 places to be offered each year.”

15. The local authority indicates that it “does not oppose” the proposal. It says,

“it would bring the school’s admissions arrangements into line with a number of local schools, where the designated catchments areas align with the ecclesiastical boundaries, and so, parish communities. This seems unremarkable. It will also signal to residents in the south of the new Arborfield Garrison community that there is another school that they could consider... Given the risk of new home led demand outstripping local supply [of school places], this extended designated area may give some additional protection to new home residents.”

The diocese has confirmed that, “we reviewed the application and were happy for the board to hand this to the adjudicator.”

16. I recognise that the significant reduction in admissions to the school in September 2022 is a matter of very serious concern to the governing board. The unforeseen admission of 30 additional children to Farley Hill School appears to have been a factor in this reduction. I understand the board’s desire to respond quickly to the changing pattern of housing and school provision in its locality. To do so by way of variation would enable its proposed enlarged catchment area to be in place for admission in September 2023, rather than the following year, after the normal process of consultation and determination of arrangements. I consider it appropriate for any enlargement to extend to the boundary of the ecclesiastical parish.

17. I would say that I am not entirely convinced that giving parents living in the areas that would be added to the catchment area “the certainty of being ‘catchment’” should of itself have the effect that the governing board hopes for. Under the equal preference system of

admissions, no additional priority for a place is given if parents make a school their first preference. Parents who wish their child to be admitted to Finchampstead CEVA School should make that school their first preference whether they live in the catchment area or not. If their application is unsuccessful, they will be in no worse a position regarding their preferences for other schools.

18. Nonetheless I do accept that the profile of the school in the new community at the southern part of the SDL might be enhanced if residents living there recognise that they live in its catchment area. It may well be that this will lead to more parents wishing their children to attend a school that is distinctive in terms of its size and Church of England Voluntary Aided status.

19. I have not been made aware of any opposition to this proposal. In my view it is, on balance, justified by the significant change in local circumstances. I approve the proposed variation.

Determination

20. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by the governing board for Finchampstead Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School for September 2023.

21. I determine that the school's catchment area shall be enlarged to cover the whole of the ecclesiastical parish of Finchampstead and California.

Dated: 29 September 2022

Signed:

Schools adjudicator: Peter Goringe