



Office of  
the Schools  
Adjudicator

## Determination

**Case reference:** VAR2442

**Admission authority:** Oxfordshire County Council for Sonning Common Primary School, Reading

**Date of decision:** 31/07/2024

## 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 Oxfordshire County Council for Sonning Common Primary School for September 2024.

I determine that the published admission number for the school will be 30.

## The referral

1. Oxfordshire County Council (the local authority (LA)) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements of Sonning Common Primary School (SCPS or the school) for September 2024 (the arrangements).
2. The school is a community school for children aged 4 to 11 in Sonning Common, Reading. It is a co-educational, non-selective primary school with no designated religious character.
3. The school was judged to be 'Good' by Ofsted at its last inspection in September 2023.
4. The proposed variation is for the published admission number (PAN) of the school to be reduced from 60 to 30 for September 2024.

## Jurisdiction and procedure

5. 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”.

6. The arrangements were determined by the Director of Children’s Services at the LA on 24 February 2023. I asked the LA why its Cabinet did not determine the arrangements for its community and voluntary controlled schools. It told me:

“[...] in Oxfordshire the Director has the delegated authority to determine the admission arrangements of Oxfordshire’s community and voluntary controlled schools.”

7. I have not asked the LA for evidence of this delegated authority and the LA did not provide it. However, I am prepared to accept that the LA’s response stands as the LA’s assurance that there is a lawful decision-making process in place.

8. The LA has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified and I have seen confirmation that the school’s governing body has been consulted on the proposed variation. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am also satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.

9. In considering the variation request I have had regard to all relevant legislation, and the Code.

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

- a. the referral from the LA dated 17 June 2024, and supporting documents, including the ‘Oxfordshire County Council Pupil Place Plan 2023/24 – 2027/28’ (the LA pupil place plan);
- b. the determined arrangements for 2024/25 and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
- c. responses received from the school and the LA in response to my requests for further information;

- d. maps, including Google Maps and those showing the locations of the school's two sites; and
- e. information available on the websites of the LA, the school, the Department for Education (DfE) (including 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS) and 'Schools Financial Benchmarking' (SFB)) and Ofsted.

11. There is no formal consultation required for a variation and so parents and others do not have the opportunity to express their views. Clearly it is desirable that changes to arrangements are made via the process of determination following consultation as the consultation process allows those with an interest to express their views. It also allows for objections to the adjudicator. None of this is afforded by the variation process.

12. However, I note here that the arrangements for 2025/26 have been determined. This means that if I agree to the admission authority's request to vary the arrangements for 2024/25 by reducing the PAN as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years. I note that a PAN of 30 for 2025/26 was determined on 21 February 2024.

## Consideration of proposed variation

13. 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 certain other limited and specified circumstances. I will consider below whether the variation requested is justified by the change in circumstances.

14. The LA told me that the reason for it seeking a variation for the school is:

"The PAN (Published Admission Number) of 60 no longer reflects the demand for places at Sonning Common Primary School. Demand has fallen dramatically with only 30 children due to be on roll in Reception in September 2024. If the PAN is reduced for 2024/25 there would be an opportunity to allow the numbers on roll to remain at 30, or if more places are offered prior to agreement to lowering the PAN, through not filling places that become available during the academic year 2024/25.

There is no prospect that the 30 spare places Sonning Common Primary School will be needed for September 2024.

Sonning Common Primary School will need to operate with an additional teacher to ensure that anyone applying for one of the 30 spare places can be accommodated. This will be a significant financial burden for the school.

Reducing the Published Admission Number would allow Sonning Common Primary School to operate with one Reception class for 2024/25.

Sonning Common Primary School will have a PAN of 30 for 2025/26."

15. The LA has a duty to make sure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the LA assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The LA uses planning areas, which are geographical areas and the schools within those areas, for this purpose.

16. The school is one of three primary schools in the LA's 'Sonning Common Planning Area' (SCPA or the planning area). According to the LA pupil place plan the other two schools in the planning area are (in order of straight line distance (in miles) from the postcode of SCPS's site taken from the DfE's GIAS website): Kidmore End Church of England Primary School (0.82); and Peppard Church of England Primary School (1.03). For completeness, I note here that the SCPA also includes a secondary school: Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge. I will only be considering the data from the primary schools.

17. The LA's pupil place plan includes the following context about the SCPA:

"This rural area comprises a number of small-medium sized villages. Levels of housing growth in this area are generally low. This area is affected by the planning policies of South Oxfordshire District Council, but also adjoins the border with Reading, across which there is significant cross-border pupil movement, especially in the secondary age range. Changes in school provision in Reading and Wokingham, for example new schools or housing growth, could affect demand for places in this area.

[In respect of] Sonning Common Primary,[ a]s is typical with small village schools, intakes can fluctuate significantly from year to year. The level of births has fluctuated in this area, but has steadily fallen in recent years, resulting in a growth of surplus primary school capacity in this area, which is forecast to continue. Both Kidmore End CoE [sic] Primary School [3807] and Sonning Common Primary School [2506] draw significant numbers of pupils from outside of Oxfordshire. No additional capacity is currently required in this area. The current layout and suitability of Sonning Common Primary School's [2506] accommodation restricts its ability to provide the necessary curriculum spaces in line with its admission number."

18. The LA has told me that it believes that the request to reduce the PAN at SCPS in 2024/25 will not only affect the SCPA but also the Henley (HPA) and Woodcote (WPA) planning areas as parents apply across planning area boundaries. I will refer to these three areas as 'the combined area'. (The schools in the HPA and WPA are listed in Table 1 below).

19. The LA provided me with the PANs for all schools in the combined area between 2022/23 and 2025/26, and estimated PANs for those schools for 2026/27. I have added that data to Table 1. The PANs are for Reception Year (YR).

Table 1: PANs for YR in schools in the combined area between 2022/21 and 2025/26 and estimated for 2026/27

<b>Schools in SCPA, HPA and WPA / PANs for YR</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/24</b>	<b>2024/25</b>	<b>2025/26</b>	<b>2026/27</b>
Badgemore Primary School	HPA	30	30	30	30	30
Checkendon Church of England Primary School	WPA	15	15	15	15	15
Goring Church of England Primary School	WPA	30	30	30	30	30
Kidmore End Church of England Primary School	SCPA	30	30	30	30	30
Nettlebed Community School	WPA	20	20	20	20	20
Peppard Church of England Primary School	SCPA	15	15	15	15	15
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School	HPA	30	30	30	30	30
Shiplake Church of England Primary School	HPA	28	28	28	28	28
Sonning Common Primary School	SCPA	60	60	60	30	30
South Stoke Primary School	WPA	7	7	7	7	7
Stoke Row Church of England Primary School	WPA	15	15	15	15	15
Trinity Church of England Primary School	HPA	45	45	45	45	45
Valley Road School	HPA	30	30	30	30	30
Whitchurch Primary School	WPA	20	20	20	20	20
Woodcote Primary School	WPA	30	30	30	30	30
<b>Totals</b>		<b>405</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>375</b>

20. The data in Table 1 show that there have been 105 places in the SCPA and 405 places in the combined area up to 2024/25. This reduces to 75 places in the SCPA and 375 in the combined area from 2025/26. This is because the PAN at SCPS has been reduced from 60 to 30 (through consultation). If I agree to reduce the PAN at SCPS to 30 (see above) in 2024/25, that will further reduce the number of places in the SCPA to 75 and in the combined area to 375 in 2024/25. The LA told me that there are a further 500 places available in primary schools in the 'general locality' (Reading and Wallingford).

21. The LA provided data showing the number of parents expressing a preference for schools in the combined area for 2022/23 to 2024/25, which I have put into Tables 2 to 4. I note here that parents applying for places for their children in the LA area can express four preferences (labelled P1 (first preference) to P4 (fourth preference) in the Tables).

Table 2: Number of parents expressing a preference for schools in the combined area for 2022/23

<b>Schools in the combined area / preferences</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>P1</b>	<b>P2</b>	<b>P3</b>	<b>P4</b>
Badgemore Primary School	HPA	15	18	15	4
Checkendon Church of England Primary School	WPA	3	8	4	4
Goring Church of England Primary School	WPA	24	11	0	4
Kidmore End Church of England Primary School	SCPA	19	25	12	7

Nettlebed Community School	WPA	20	14	9	5
Peppard Church of England Primary School	SCPA	10	12	11	6
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School	HPA	6	13	7	5
Shiplake Church of England Primary School	HPA	15	6	10	4
Sonning Common Primary School	SCPA	43	9	4	14
South Stoke Primary School	WPA	1	1	8	2
Stoke Row Church of England Primary School	WPA	3	7	7	2
Trinity Church of England Primary School	HPA	50	14	10	3
Valley Road School	HPA	16	20	10	7
Whitchurch Primary School	WPA	25	8	7	0
Woodcote Primary School	WPA	20	3	3	1
<b>Total preferences</b>		<b>270</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>68</b>

Table 3: Number of parents expressing a preference for schools in the combined area for 2023/24

<b>Schools in the combined area / preferences</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>P1</b>	<b>P2</b>	<b>P3</b>	<b>P4</b>
Badgemore Primary School	HPA	15	10	17	13
Checkendon Church of England Primary School	WPA	8	7	3	5
Goring Church of England Primary School	WPA	15	7	11	5
Kidmore End Church of England Primary School	SCPA	25	26	10	9
Nettlebed Community School	WPA	26	6	5	5
Peppard Church of England Primary School	SCPA	11	9	20	7
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School	HPA	10	17	14	6
Shiplake Church of England Primary School	HPA	23	9	12	5
Sonning Common Primary School	SCPA	33	25	12	4
South Stoke Primary School	WPA	5	2	3	8
Stoke Row Church of England Primary School	WPA	11	5	9	6
Trinity Church of England Primary School	HPA	58	35	10	4
Valley Road School	HPA	20	33	21	10
Whitchurch Primary School	WPA	23	11	4	3
Woodcote Primary School	WPA	18	13	6	2
<b>Total preferences</b>		<b>301</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>92</b>

Table 4: Number of parents expressing a preference for schools in the combined area for 2024/25

<b>Schools in the combined area / preferences</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>P1</b>	<b>P2</b>	<b>P3</b>	<b>P4</b>
Badgemore Primary School	HPA	16	8	14	17
Checkendon Church of England Primary School	WPA	17	13	8	2
Goring Church of England Primary School	WPA	23	8	4	0
Kidmore End Church of England Primary School	SCPA	28	20	7	2
Nettlebed Community School	WPA	27	10	9	7
Peppard Church of England Primary School	SCPA	9	9	11	9
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School	HPA	17	13	13	10
Shiplake Church of England Primary School	HPA	23	8	8	3
Sonning Common Primary School	SCPA	28	16	11	6
South Stoke Primary School	WPA	1	3	5	7
Stoke Row Church of England Primary School	WPA	7	12	13	6
Trinity Church of England Primary School	HPA	45	34	17	4

Valley Road School	HPA	27	37	14	10
Whitchurch Primary School	WPA	14	8	11	2
Woodcote Primary School	WPA	17	8	14	5
<b>Total preferences</b>		<b>299</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>90</b>

22. The data in Tables 2 to 4 show that over the three year period, the number of parents expressing a preference for schools in the SCPA has been 172 in 2022/23, 191 in 2023/24 and then 156 in 2024/25. When a linear trendline is applied to that data, it shows an overall decrease in that period. In contrast, the combined area shows an overall increase in the same period as 624 preferences were expressed for places in schools in 2022/23, 765 in 2023/24 and 755 in 2024/25.

23. The LA provided data to show the number of places offered on National Offer Day (NOD) in the three years from 2022/23 to 2024/25 for schools in the combined area. I have put that data into Table 5 and shown the totals for the combined area and the SCPA.

Table 5: Number of places offered on NOD in the three years from 2022/23 to 2024/25 for schools in the combined area

<b>Schools in the combined area / offers</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/24</b>	<b>2024/25</b>
Badgemore Primary School	HPA	16	18	16
Checkendon Church of England Primary School	WPA	3	8	15
Goring Church of England Primary School	WPA	26	15	24
Kidmore End Church of England Primary School	SCPA	21	25	30
Nettlebed Community School	WPA	21	26	20
Peppard Church of England Primary School	SCPA	11	11	9
Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School	HPA	7	13	17
Shiplake Church of England Primary School	HPA	15	23	23
Sonning Common Primary School	SCPA	43	34	28
South Stoke Primary School	WPA	1	5	1
Stoke Row Church of England Primary School	WPA	4	11	8
Trinity Church of England Primary School	HPA	45	45	45
Valley Road School	HPA	16	27	31
Whitchurch Primary School	WPA	20	20	15
Woodcote Primary School	WPA	21	19	17
<b>Total offers (combined area)</b>		<b>270</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>Total offers (SCPA)</b>		<b>75</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>67</b>

24. The data in Table 5 show an increase overall in the number of offers made for places in the combined area over the three years. In contrast, the number of offers made for places in the SCPA has reduced by eight over the same period. Arising from my analysis of the data provided by the LA is the data in Tables 6 and 7 which show the number of surplus places between 2022/23 and 2024/25 in the combined area and SCPA.

Table 6: Number of surplus places between 2022/23 and 2024/25 in the combined area

	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/24</b>	<b>2024/25</b>
<b>Number of places available in the combined area</b>	405	405	405
<b>Offers on NOD</b>	270	300	299
<b>Number of surplus places</b>	135	105	106
<b>Percentage of surplus places</b>	33.33	25.93	26.17

Table 7: Number of surplus places between 2022/23 and 2024/25 in the SCPA

	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/24</b>	<b>2024/25</b>
<b>Number of places available in the SCPA</b>	105	105	105
<b>Offers on NOD</b>	75	70	67
<b>Number of surplus places</b>	30	35	38
<b>Percentage of surplus places</b>	28.57	33.33	36.19

25. I can see from the data in Table 6, that the number of surplus places in schools in the combined area has been decreasing from 33.33 per cent of the total number of places in 2022/23 (at its highest) and 26.17 per cent in 2024/25 (slightly increased from the lowest percentage in 2023/24). If I agree to reduce the PAN (see above) at SCPS to 30 in 2024/25, there would be 76 places available (a surplus of 20.27 per cent of the total number of places available in the combined area).

26. The data in Table 7 show that the number of surplus places in the SCPA is increasing over the same period from 30 on 2022/23 (28.57 per cent of the total number of places in the SCPA) to 38 in 2024/25 (36.19 of the total number of places in the SCPA). If I agree to reduce the PAN (see above) at SCPS to 30 in 2024/25, there would be eight places available (a surplus of 10.67 per cent of the total number of places available in the SCPA).

27. The LA provided data showing the forecast admission numbers for the combined area for the three years from 2025/26, which I have put into Table 8.

Table 8: Forecast admission numbers for the combined area for the three years from 2025/26

<b>Area</b>	<b>2025/26</b>	<b>2026/27</b>	<b>2027/28</b>
<b>HPA</b>	121	117	118
<b>SCPA</b>	63	54	56
<b>WPA</b>	94	88	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>264</b>

28. Adding a linear trendline to the data totals in Table 8 shows that there is forecast to be a decrease overall in the demand for places in both the SCPA and the combined area for the three years between 2025/26 to 2027/28. The trend for a decrease in demand for



places in the future is clear. It does not appear, therefore, that the reduction in the PAN at SCPS will affect the LA's ability to meet its duty to provide sufficient places in the planning area. There is clear evidence that there will be a number of spare places in 2024/25 should they be needed, and there will be for a number of years to follow.

29. Turning now to the school. I first looked at the school's financial position. This is because schools are funded, in large part, on a per child basis. A reduction in the number of children admitted, therefore, results in a reduction in income. I noted from the SFB website that in 2022/23, the school had an in-year deficit of -£24.4k and a revenue reserve of £181.4k. This shows that the school's finances were under pressure in-year which if it continued could place pressure on the revenue reserve over time. I asked the school to provide me with evidence of the financial impact on the school if I did not agree to the PAN reduction requested, which means that the school would have to maintain the level of staffing and resources necessary to fulfil its current PAN. About this the school told me:

"If the PAN were to remain at 60 and the 31st child joined the year group. As we are unable to mix classes due to safety reasons this would necessitate a second class being formed within the Reception Year. The effect [would be] quite profound at the end of the fifth year. There will of course be seven years of financial pain. This is with adding a 1FTE at M6.

[...] the cumulative effect is catastrophic to our school's budget."

30. The school's financial projections are such that a reduction in PAN for YR in 2024/25 will not in and of itself solve the financial problems the school faces, but will significantly help. The governing body of the school and the LA are concerned that continuing to staff and resource the school for a higher number of children than is currently being projected to be admitted is an unsustainable situation for the school. The school would be expected to work with the LA to ensure a balanced budget. That is why the school are supporting the LA's request for this variation.

31. I asked the school for the number of children currently in each class. This allows me to look at how the school organises its classes, to see if mixed-age classes might be a solution to reduce costs as income declines as a result of falling admission numbers, rather than reducing the PAN. I have put those numbers into Table 9 (the total number of children on roll at the school at the point the numbers were provided was 363).

Table 9: Numbers of children in each class in the school (as of July 2024)

<b>Year Group / Classes</b>	<b>YR</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>	<b>Year 6</b>
<b>1</b>	19	25	26	30	25	28	31
<b>2</b>	17	24	26	28	25	28	31
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>62</b>

32. I also asked the school to provide me with information on how classes would be organised if the variation is agreed and if it is not agreed. I have put that data into Tables 10 (variation agreed) and 11 (variation not agreed).

Table 10: Numbers of children in each class in the school in 2024/25 (if variation agreed)

<b>Year Group / Classes</b>	<b>YR</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>	<b>Year 6</b>
<b>1</b>	30	19	25	26	30	25	28
<b>2</b>	-	17	24	26	28	25	28
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>56</b>

Table 11: Numbers of children in each class in the school in 2024/25 (if variation not agreed)

<b>Year Group / Classes</b>	<b>YR<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>	<b>Year 6</b>
<b>1</b>	30	19	25	26	30	25	28
<b>2</b>	1	17	24	26	28	25	28
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>56</b>

#### Key

<sup>1</sup> The school would more likely organise the 31 children into two groups of 15 / 16 rather than it has indicated. However, the point is that the school says it would have to run two classes in YR

33. It is clear from the data that, if I do not agree to a reduction to the PAN in YR, the school would need to run two YR classes which would be economically unviable. This is because it would require the substantial cost of another teacher, potentially another teaching assistant and other costs associated with running two classrooms as opposed to one.

34. About organising its classes into mixed-age groups, the school told me:

“We currently do not mix classes.

We currently have 4 pupils with EHCPs in our current reception class. There are a further 3 children where we have completed an EHCNA [Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment]. This is one of our most volatile and challenging year groups that we have currently in school. We could not even consider mixing children from this year group with another.”

35. I can see that employing mixed-age classes at SCPS is not the school's preference and in fact would not solve the problem caused by the reduction in the number of children admitted to YR in 2024/25 and the resulting reduction in income.

36. It was clear from the data provided by the LA, that it has a picture of recent / projected demand in schools in its planning areas. It appeared to me that the matter raised in respect of the PAN at SCPS and the surplus places in the SCPA in 2024/25 would have been obvious in enough time for what has been requested to have been dealt with through the consultation process prior to the determination of the 2024 arrangements. I raised this concern with the LA, though it did not provide any response.

37. I accept that the LA has provided compelling evidence that it will be able to manage school places in the planning area by reducing the PAN at SCPS for 2024/25. The reduction in PAN will also contribute to the school being able to continue to address the impact on its finances resulting from the decrease in income. I do not assess the reduction in PAN to cause any issues with parental preference on the basis that the number of children allocated places at the school is less than the PAN would be if I agree to the reduction (the number offered places for admission in September 2024 is 28, as shown in Table 5).

38. I therefore agree to the reduction in the PAN from 60 to 30 for 2024/25.

39. I note here that reducing the PAN does not reduce the overall capacity of the school unless accommodation is being removed from the premises. It is not being suggested that accommodation is being removed and so the physical capacity of the school remains the same. Reducing the PAN will not change that. What this means is that should there be a need for the school to increase its PAN and / or admit more children in 2024/25 than it currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the building for it to do so.

## Determination

40. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Oxfordshire County Council for Sonning Common Primary School for September 2024.

41. I determine that the published admission number for the school will be 30.

Dated: 31/07/2024

Signed:

Schools adjudicator: Dr Robert Cawley