



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2500, VAR2501

Admission authority: Trafford Council for Highfield Primary School in Urmston, Manchester

Date of decision: 25 October 2024

Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variations to the admission arrangements determined by Trafford Council for Highfield Primary School for September 2024 and September 2025.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in September 2024 shall be 30.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in September 2025 shall be 30.

The referral

1. Trafford Council (the local authority) has referred proposals for variations to the admission arrangements (the arrangements) for September 2024 and September 2025 for Highfield Primary School (the school) to the adjudicator. The school is a community school for children aged three to eleven in Urmston, Manchester, and the local authority is the admission authority for the school.
2. The proposed variations are that the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 40 to 30 for admissions to reception year (YR) in 2024/25 and again in 2025/26.

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. I have been provided with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified and that the proposed variations have the support of the school’s governing body. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variations are within my jurisdiction.

5. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation, and the Code.

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

- a. the referral from the local authority dated 9 September 2024, supporting documents and further information provided at my request;
- b. the determined arrangements for 2024 and for 2025 and the proposed variations to those arrangements;
- c. a map showing the location of the school and other relevant schools; and
- d. information available on the websites of the local authority, the school and the Department for Education.

The proposed variations

7. It is proposed to reduce the PAN from 40 to 30 for entry to YR in 2024/25 and also in 2025/26.

8. 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.

Consideration of proposed variations

9. 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 PAN reductions 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 and so it is particularly important that the proposed variations are properly scrutinised. I note here that the arrangements for September 2026 have not yet been determined, and so if the proposed variation for 2025/26 were to be approved, the PAN for 2026/27 could be set at 30 by the local authority without objection save from the governing body of the school.

10. The major change in circumstances relied upon by the local authority is set out in the referral, which states:

“A reduction in provision of school places in several schools in Trafford will be consulted on in the autumn term as part of the determination of the admission arrangements for 2026, across different types of schools in the area. The local authority is working collaboratively with governing bodies, diocese and academy trusts in its area to codesign the approach. The required reduction is driven by the reducing birth rate and changes in levels of inbound migration which has always been a significant factor in pupil place planning in this area. In recent months, Trafford has started to see a significant reduction of inbound migration, linked to cost of living factors, with outbound migration between birth and age four seen in some areas for the first time. This same issue is being experienced in other local authorities in our region who share similar demographics, with cost of living factors driving out migration from more affluent boroughs.

Due to the accelerated rate of change, there is now an overprovision of school places in reception year which is impacting school budgets. The future demand for places in the Urmston planning area is expected to see a small one-year increase between 2024 and 2025 which can be easily accommodated and still leave a surplus, then it is set to decrease further in all subsequent years.

Highfield Primary School has a PAN of 40 which means classes are vertically grouped throughout the school. This has created complexity in terms of strategic planning, class structure, transition, curriculum planning and assessment. Having a mixed reception and year 1 class, across 2 phases of education, is particularly challenging.

The request is being made in order that we can change the school organisation to a single form of entry to protect our financial viability. The PAN of 40 is no longer financially viable, especially when the demand for places is only 30 and we are no longer receiving sufficient central funding to support our unusual PAN.

The school is facing combined impact of reduced admissions and decreased additional funding. This situation could not have been foreseen, otherwise we would have used the usual consultation period. The quicker the changes can be made, the less the negative financial impact on the school. This is why we are asking for these changes for 2024 and 2025 rather than waiting for a consultation period.

There are currently 30 pupils allocated in the reception class. If the variation is agreed, this year group can remain in just one class, removing the requirement for the YR/Y1 cross phase class which is difficult to manage. It will also remove the need for mixed year group classes throughout the school which will deliver advantages in terms of curriculum planning and educational outcomes. The current two-year rolling programme is difficult to plan, deliver and assess. OFSTED, February 2023 found this aspect of Highfield's teaching and learning difficult to comprehend.

It will support financial sustainability and mean the school is able to set a proposed 3-year budget on a PAN of 30 without going into deficit. It will mean school can strategically plan for the reduced numbers by reducing the staffing levels over time as the new PAN moves through the school."

11. I have accordingly given careful consideration to the latest available data in order to form a view about the sufficiency of school places in the local area if the PAN is reduced from 40 to 30 for 2024/25 and for 2025/26 and beyond. I have also considered the demand for places at the school, the reasons given for the changes, the potential effect on parental preference and whether the changes are justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

12. The local authority has a duty to make sure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the local authority assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The local authority uses planning areas, which are geographical areas each containing a number of schools, for this purpose. The school sits within the Urmston planning area.

13. The local authority has provided me with the following relevant data regarding admissions to Urmston planning area schools, together with forecasts for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

Table 1: Number of children admitted to YR at Urmston schools

	2022/23 (admitted)	2023/24 (admitted)	2024/25 (admitted)	2025/26 (forecast)	2026/27 (forecast)
TOTAL	463	467	411	443	403
Sum of PANs for YR	510	510	510	510	510
Vacant places	47	43	99	67	107

if proposed variations are approved and PAN is also set at 30 for 2026/27

Sum of PANs for YR			500	500	500
Vacant places			89	57	97
Vacant places as a percentage			18%	11%	19%

14. The local authority also tells me that as well as the current 99 vacancies in YR in the Urmston planning area, there are vacancies in schools in the neighbouring Stretford planning area which are within a one-mile walking distance of the school:

- a. St Hugh of Lincoln RC Primary School (0.5 miles) – currently 7 surplus YR places.
- b. Kingsway Primary School (0.8 miles) – currently 16 surplus YR places.
- c. Barton Clough Primary School (0.9 miles) – currently 17 surplus YR places.

15. From the above data, I am satisfied that if the proposed variation for 2024/25 were approved, there would still be sufficient places within a suitable distance of the school for any children whose parents are seeking a place for them in YR during the 2024/25 school year.

16. I am also satisfied that a PAN of 30 for 2025/26 would leave sufficient places for children who live within a suitable distance of the school and whose parents are seeking a place for their child to be admitted to YR in 2025/26. If that particular proposed variation were approved, it would be possible for the local authority to determine a PAN of 30 for the following year without consultation. I am also satisfied that a PAN of 30 for 2026 would not lead to a shortage of places in the local area in 2026/27.

17. I now turn to the number of children at the school and the reasons given by the school in support of the variation request. There are currently 30 children in YR and the local authority tells me that there were 31 first preferences for the school, with 31 offers being made on National Offer Day with one being subsequently declined. There are 38 children in Y1, who were admitted in 2023/24, and for that year of entry there were only 32 first preferences. The local authority does not forecast at school level, but I am satisfied

from the information I have that there is no clear evidence to show that a PAN of 30 will lead to significant frustration of parental preference for the school in either 2025 or 2026.

18. The requests for the variations refer to the governing body's wish to align its staffing and budget to the reducing number of children. The provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Size) (England) Regulations 2012 (the infant class size regulations) apply to the school, and they require that infant classes (those where the majority of children will reach the age of five, six or seven during the school year) must not contain more than 30 pupils with a single qualified school teacher, except in specific exceptional circumstances.

19. The school has provided me with a population analysis to show that it currently has a single YR class of 30 children. If the proposed variation for 2024/25 is not agreed, then any in-year admissions will still have to be admitted until the number of children admitted to YR is 40. Any such in-year admission would be likely to require a reorganisation of classes midway through the year to avoid breaching the infant class size regulations and would present a significant logistical and financial challenge. Also, if the number in YR is "capped" at 30, then the school will be able to plan for certainty on the basis that in September 2025 it will need staffing for only one class in Y1.

20. Similarly, if I approve the variation for 2025/26, then the school will be able to plan for certainty on the basis that in September 2025 it will need staffing for one class in YR. It will also be reassured that there will be no possibility of having to reorganise mid-year due to any in-year admissions to YR in 2025/26 that would take the total number of children above 30.

21. After consideration of the factors above, and taking into account the relevant circumstances, I find that both variations are justified, and I approve them. The PAN for 2024/25 will be 30, and the PAN for 2025/26 will be 30.

Determination

22. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variations to the admission arrangements determined by Trafford Council for Highfield Primary School for September 2024 and September 2025.

23. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in September 2024 shall be 30.

24. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in September 2025 shall be 30.

Dated: 25 October 2024

Signed:

Schools adjudicator: Clive Sentance