



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2503

Admission authority: Trafford Council for Stamford Park Primary School,
Altrincham, Cheshire

Date of decision: 1 November 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 Trafford Council for Stamford Park Primary School for September 2025.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in 2025/26 shall be 60.

The referral

1. Trafford Council (the local authority) has referred a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the arrangements) for September 2025 for Stamford Park Primary School (the school) to the adjudicator. The school is a community school for children aged three to eleven in Altrincham, Cheshire, and the local authority is the admission authority for the school.
2. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 70 to 60 for admissions to reception year (YR) 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 variation has the support of the school’s governing body. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is 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 27 September 2024, supporting documents and further information provided at my request;
 - b. the determined arrangements for 2025 and the proposed variation 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 70 to 60 for entry to YR 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 variation

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 variation is 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 60 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 Altrincham planning area is expected to decrease further.

The PAN of 70 is not financially viable when the demand for places is well under 60. The request is being made in order that we can change our school organisation to two forms of entry to protect our financial viability.

The school is facing [the] combined impact of reduced admissions and decreased 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 2025 rather than waiting for a consultation period.

[The school's] current class structure is:

- 7x vertically grouped mixed age classes of 30 across YR, Y1 and Y2
- 2x classes of 35 in each of Y3, Y4, Y5 and Y6

If the PAN is reduced from 70 to 60, this would remove the requirement for mixed age classes in the Early Years and Infant Department. This currently creates complexity with curriculum planning and assessment. We would be able to operate as a 2-form entry with 2x single year classes of 30 in each of YR, Y1 and Y2. This will then benefit the school financially as the current levels of under occupancy are

not sustainable, we need to be able to reduce the number of classes in the structure as pupil numbers decrease to protect our financial viability.

In the 2023 reception cohort, 51 children were admitted to the reception year. In 2024, this dropped to 38 which is well below the proposed changed PAN of 60. There are currently 246 reception vacancies in the Altrincham planning area, giving a vacancy rate of 26%. The proposed variation will therefore not result in parental preference being frustrated.”

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 70 to 60 for 2025/26 and beyond. I have also considered the demand for places at the school, the reasons given for the changes in demand, the potential effect on parental preference of the proposed PAN reduction and whether the proposed reduction is 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 Altrincham planning area.

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

Table 1: Number of children admitted, or forecasted to be admitted, to YR at Altrincham schools

	2022/23 (admitted)	2023/24 (admitted)	2024/25 (admitted)	2025/26 (forecast)	2026/27 (forecast)
Number of children	790	734	719	726	615
Sum of PANs for YR	965	980	965	965	910 ¹
Vacant places	175	246	246	239	295
Sum of PANs for YR, if proposed variation is approved				925 ²	910

¹ This figure includes planned reductions to PANs in 2026 at Stamford Park (from 70 to 60), at the school in VAR2502 (see footnote 2) (from 60 to 30), and at one other school (from 60 to 45)

² The local authority has submitted a proposal for a variation (VAR2502) to the PAN for 2025/26 for another school in the planning area. This would lead to a further reduction of 30 places, and I have factored this into the data analysis.

	2022/23 (admitted)	2023/24 (admitted)	2024/25 (admitted)	2025/26 (forecast)	2026/27 (forecast)
Vacant places, if proposed variation is approved				199	295
Ditto, as a percentage				22%	32%

14. From the above data, I am satisfied that a reduction of the school's PAN to 60 for 2025/26 would leave sufficient places in the local planning area for children who live within a reasonable distance of the school and whose parents are seeking a place for their child to be admitted to YR in 2025/26. If the proposed variation were approved, it would be possible for the local authority to determine a PAN of 60 for the following year without consultation. I am also satisfied that a PAN of 60 for 2026 would not lead to a shortage of places in the local planning area in 2026/27.

15. 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 38 children in YR and the local authority tells me that there were 39 first preferences for the school in 2024. There were 51 children admitted to YR in 2023, and for that year of entry there were only 47 first preferences expressed for the school. The local authority does not forecast demand for places at school level, but I am satisfied from the information provided that there is no clear evidence to show that a PAN of 60 will lead to significant frustration of parental preference for the school in either 2025 or 2026.

16. The request for the variation refers 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 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.

17. If I approve the proposed 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 only two classes in YR. It will therefore be able to adopt a six-class teaching structure across YR and Key Stage 1, which will improve the school's financial viability. It will also be reassured that there will be no possibility of having to reorganise into mixed-age classes mid-year due to any in-year admissions to YR in 2025/26 that would take the total number of children in YR above 60.

18. After consideration of the factors above, and taking into account the relevant circumstances, I find that the variation is justified, and I approve it. The PAN for 2025/26 will be 60.

Determination

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

20. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to reception year in 2025/26 shall be 60.

Dated: 1 November 2024

Signed:

Schools adjudicator: Clive Sentance