



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2586-VAR2587

Admission Authority: Halton Borough Council for Moorfield Primary School, Widnes

Date of advice: 15 July 2025

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 Halton Borough Council for Moorfield Primary School for 2025/26. I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2025/26, the published admission number shall be 30.

I also approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Halton Borough Council for Moorfield Primary School for 2026/27. The published admission number for 2026/27 shall be 30.

The referral

1. Halton Borough Council (the Admission Authority, the Local Authority) has referred to the adjudicator proposals for variations to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for Moorfield Primary School (the School) for 2025/26 and 2026/27.
2. The School is a community school for children aged four to eleven years in Widnes, Cheshire. 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 most recent inspection in December 2024.
4. Parties to the request are the School and the Local Authority.

5. The proposed variations are that:
 - the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 45 to 30 for admissions to Reception Year (YR) in the academic year beginning in September 2025 (VAR2586); and
 - the PAN be reduced from 45 to 30 for admissions to YR in the academic year beginning in September 2026 (VAR2587).

Jurisdiction and procedure

6. Section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) makes provision for variations to determined arrangements. Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the School Admissions Code (the Code) say (insofar as is 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”.
7. The 2025/26 Arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 18 January 2024. The 2026/27 Arrangements were determined on 16 January 2025.
8. The Local Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variations in line with the Code.
9. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variations are within my jurisdiction.
10. In considering the variation requests, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.
11. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:
 - the referral from the Admission Authority dated 13 June 2025 and supporting documents;

- the determined Arrangements for 2025/26 and 2026/27 and the proposed variations to those Arrangements;
 - responses from the LA and the School to my requests for further information;
 - a map showing the location of the School; and
 - information available on the websites of the Department for Education (DfE) (including 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS), and 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT)); Ofsted; the LA and the School.
12. 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.
13. I note that the Arrangements for 2026/27 have been determined. This means that if I agree to the Local Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2025/26 by reducing the PAN as proposed, it will be for that year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years.
14. I also note that the Arrangements for 2027/28 have not yet been determined. This means that if I approve the proposed variation for 2026/27, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years. This is understood by the Local Authority who acknowledged in their request for a variation that if the proposed variation for 2026/27 were to be approved, the PAN for 2027/28 and subsequent years could be set at 30 without objection save from the Governing Body of the School.

Consideration of proposed variation

15. The Local Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 45 to 30 for entry to YR in September 2025. It has also proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 45 to 30 for entry to YR in September 2026. The proposed variations have the support of the School's Governing Body.
16. 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 proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances.
17. The major change in circumstances relied upon by the Local Authority is set out in the referral, which states:

“The school has a current PAN of 45, but for the 2024 and 2025 intakes has not received the level of applications as in previous years, being 26 and 30 respectively, and the School has requested a reduction in PAN to 30 for the September 2025 intake, meaning no further applications can be admitted, and a reduction in PAN to 30 for the September 2026 intake (and subsequent years), and the LA as admission authority supports that request.

Previously the school was receiving intakes of up to the PAN of 45, but more recent intakes have reduced as detailed above. Falling birth rates have impacted the school and the planning area and are forecasted to continue to fall/remain at the lower intake rate. The LA had intended on consulting on a PAN of 30 for the school for the September 2027 intake due to falling numbers, and this request for variation seeks to bring forward that decision making process.

All of the families who requested a place at the School for the September 2025 intake have been offered a place, therefore no family's preference will be frustrated by making the change (reduction) at this time. By reducing the PAN for the September 2025 intake (and subsequent years) the school will be able to operate with one Reception Class of 30 pupils.

The School have advised that they will not have sufficient funding or staffing to operate four KS1 classes from September 2025 and subsequent intakes, and will have to operate with three mixed age classes across KS1. The reduction in admissions over time has had a detrimental effect on the school's budget as each child comes with funding. Whilst the school is losing circa 45 pupils from KS2 as those pupils transfer to secondary school, they are only admitting 30 or below into the Reception Class, which in turn has detrimental budgetary implications for the school and therefore impacts on staffing and organisation. ...

As the school is currently on 30 allocations for the September 2025 intake, the admission of any additional children beyond 30 would not be sufficient in financial terms to cover the cost of additional staff required. In summary, as the school's PAN at 45 is currently more than 1 FE but does not fill each intake at the point of entry, part filled classes would cause financial pressure and organisational issues for the school.”

18. I have 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 of the School is reduced from 45 to 30 for 2025/26 and, separately, for 2026/27. I have also considered the demand for places at the School, the reasons given for the change in demand, the potential effect of the proposed PAN reduction on meeting parental preference, and whether the proposed reduction is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

19. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure 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 is based in the Widnes East planning area of the Local Authority. There are ten schools in the planning area that cater for primary age children. Nine of these, including the School, admit children into YR.
20. Table 1 summarises the data supplied to me by the Local Authority for each of the schools in the planning area that admit children into YR; the number of children admitted in each of the previous three years; the number of places offered for 2025 and the forecast numbers for 2026.

Table 1: School places in the planning area and allocation to YR

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
The total PAN	460	460	460	450	450	n/a
The number of children admitted to YR or forecast to be admitted	434	385	384	388	358	368
The number of vacant places	26	75	76	62	92	n/a
The number of vacant places as a percentage of the total number of places	5.7	16.3	16.5	13.8	20.4	n/a

VAR2586 – PAN reduction for 2025

21. Table 1 shows that there has been a high number of vacant places for children entering YR in the planning area since 2023. This is forecast to be the case for children starting YR in September 2025. The DfE document, “Basic need allocations 2025-26: Explanatory note on methodology”, refers to the need for two per cent surplus capacity “to provide an operating margin for local authorities ... to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system”. I note that the proportion of vacant places in the planning area has been considerably higher than 2 per cent in recent years and would remain so if I were to agree to the proposed variation for September 2025.
22. From the data in Table 1, I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 30 for 2025, there would be sufficient places available in the planning area for any parents seeking a YR place for their child.
23. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. Table 2 summarises the admissions to the School.

Table 2: The number of children admitted to YR at the School

	2022	2023	2024	2025
The PAN for the School	45	45	45	45
The number of first preferences	26	36	22	30
The number of children admitted to YR (places offered 2025)	43	33	25	30
The number of vacant places	2	12	20	15
The number of vacant places as a percentage	4.4	26.7	44.4	33.3

24. Table 2 shows that all the children whose parents identified the School as their first preference have been offered a place there for September 2025. The proposed variation will, therefore, have no effect on parental preference in respect of applications received as part of the normal admissions process for September 2025.
25. If the PAN were to be reduced to 30, there would be no vacant places at the School. However, as set out earlier, there are YR places available across the planning area.
26. The School is affected by the provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Size) (England) Regulations 2012 (the infant class size regulations) which 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. The infant class size regulations apply to YR, Year 1 (Y1) and Year 2 (Y2). As schools are largely funded based on the number of pupils on their rolls, it is more efficient financially for primary schools to have classes of 30 or near to 30. Classes that are significantly smaller than 30 can create financial strain upon a school.
27. If the School has numbers of children that are a little over 30 in YR then it will either have to create two small YR classes, which is an expensive model, or consider regrouping the children to create mixed age classes.
28. The number of places allocated for 2025/26 is 30. If this number were to be admitted, then the School could run one YR class. However, if the PAN remains at 45, the School will be required to admit any child during the academic year whose parents request a place at the School until 45 children have been admitted. This could mean classes would need to be reorganised and additional staff recruited during the year. This creates uncertainty as the School would not know if or when an additional class would be required. As well as being potentially disruptive and unsettling for both children and staff, it would also be financially inefficient. If the number of children in YR is limited to

30, then the School will be able to plan with certainty that in September 2025 it will need staffing for one YR class.

29. The School provided additional information in support of their request to reduce the PAN for 2025/26. In September 2025, there will be 30 children in YR, based on places allocated to date, 26 children in Y1 and 34 children in Y2. The School plans to organise the children into three classes: YR; Y1/2; Y2. The School stated:

“...any in year admissions [in YR, Y1 or Y2] would take the class sizes over the legal infant class size of 30. The budget does not allow for an extra teacher to be employed at KS1.”

30. The School also notes:

“Being a one and a half form entry PAN (45), the school does consider mixed classes and does, depending on numbers on roll, accommodate mixed age classes. Mixed age classes are not an issue for the school if the PAN of 45 [or close to it] is reached as there is adequate finance to staff the classes. The difficulty has arisen as the budget does not allow the school to adequately staff classes as the numbers on roll each year vary and the PAN of 45 is not being met.”

31. Taking everything into consideration, I am of the view that the variation is justified by the circumstances, and I approve the proposed variation to reduce the PAN for 2025/26 to 30.

VAR2587 – PAN reduction for 2026

32. As set out in Table 1, the Local Authority is forecasting that it will require 358 YR places in 2026/27. Based on this data, if the proposed PAN reduction is agreed, there would be 77 vacant YR places in the area. This is equivalent to a surplus capacity of 17.7 per cent. A similar number of places are also forecast for 2027/28.

33. The Local Authority provided some additional forecast data to support its request for a reduction in PAN for 2026/27:

“Our latest GP registration data ... indicates a continued reduction in births within the town of Widnes as a whole, from 667 children registered with a GP that live within Widnes postcode areas with a Date of Birth between 01/09/20 – 31/08/21 (the September 2025 intake year) reducing to 594 with a Date of Birth between 01/09/23 – 31/08/24 (the September 2028 intake). This GP data is set against an overall Reception Class PAN in the town of Widnes as a whole of 715 places (450 in Widnes East where Moorfield is situated and 265 in Widnes West).”

34. I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 30 for 2026/27, there would continue to be sufficient places available in the planning area for any parents seeking a YR place for their child in that year and for the foreseeable future.
35. As set out in Table 2, the number of parents selecting the School as their first preference for a YR place for their child was 30 or fewer in three out of the last four years. At the current time, there is no information relating to parental preference for the schools in the planning area for 2026/27. However, given the historic pattern of preferences and forecast numbers, it is likely that the great majority of, if not all, parental first preferences would be satisfied with a PAN of 30. As the School is situated in an urban area and there are eight other schools admitting children to YR within two miles of the School, I am assured that a reduction in PAN would result in minimal frustration of parental preference.
36. With regard to the School's financial situation, the DfE's FBIT website shows that, in March 2024 the school had an in-year balance of £8K and a revenue reserve of £45K. Although these figures show a small positive balance, the four-year financial summary provided by the School shows that it is likely to be in a deficit budget situation within two years unless some changes are made. Knowing that the School will have one form of entry will, as stated above, provide greater certainty around pupil numbers and enable leaders to plan ahead, helping to secure the School's financial future.
37. For the reasons set out above, I agree that a reduction in the PAN to 30 for 2026/27 would provide greater stability for the School and its pupils and benefit the School financially. On balance, I find that these benefits outweigh any potential frustration of parental preference should any arise. I have also taken into consideration that parents would know the revised PAN for 2026 before they need to make their application for a school place.
38. Taking everything into consideration, I am of the view that the variation is justified by the circumstances, and I approve the proposed variation to reduce the PAN for 2026/27 to 30.

Determination

39. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Halton Borough Council for Moorfield Primary School for 2025/26. I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2025/26, the published admission number shall be 30.

40. I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Halton Borough Council for Moorfield Primary School for 2026/27. The published admission number for 2026/27 shall be 30.

Dated: 15 July 2025

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Catherine Crooks