Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	**ADA4440**
Objector:	**A parent**
Admission authority:	**Lancashire County Council for Balshaw's Church of England High School**
Date of decision:	**22 September 2025**

Determination

In accordance with section 88H(4) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I uphold the objection to the admission arrangements for September 2026 determined by Lancashire County Council for Balshaw's Church of England High School.

By virtue of section 88K(2) the adjudicator's decision is binding on the admission authority. The School Admissions Code requires the admission authority to revise its admission arrangements within two months of the date of the determination, unless an alternative timescale is specified by the adjudicator. In this case I determine that the arrangements must be revised by 3 October. This deadline will ensure that the arrangements are revised within a reasonable time before the deadline for applications to be made for 2026 entry.

The referral

1. Under section 88H(2) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, (the Act), an objection has been referred to the adjudicator by a parent (the objector), about the admission arrangements (the arrangements) for Balshaw's Church of England High School (the School or BHS) for September 2026. BHS is a secondary, voluntary controlled school with a Church of England Religious Character. The religious body for the School is the Diocese of Blackburn (the Diocese).

2. The objection concerns the catchment area that is used to prioritise applicants to the School. The local authority for the area in which the School is located is Lancashire County Council (the Local Authority or LA). The LA is also the admission authority for the School

and a party to this objection. The other parties to the objection are the objector, the Diocese and the School.

Jurisdiction

3. These arrangements were determined under section 88C of the Act by the Local Authority, which as I have said is the admission authority for the School. The objector submitted her objection to these determined arrangements on 22 April 2025. The objector has asked to have her identity kept from the other parties and has met the requirement of regulation 24 of the School Admissions (Admission Arrangements and Co-ordination of Admission Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2012 by providing details of her name and address to me. I am satisfied the objection has been properly referred to me in accordance with section 88H of the Act and it is within my jurisdiction.

Procedure

4. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the School Admissions Code (the Code).

5. The documents I have considered in reaching my decision include:

a. a copy of the minutes of the meeting of the LA at which the arrangements were determined;

b. a copy of the determined arrangements;

c. the objector's form of objection dated 22 April 2025 and supporting documents, including an email from the LA admissions team to the objector of 8 August 2024 (the August 2024 email) and one of 14 January 2025 (the January 2025 email);

d. the LA's response to the objection and supporting documents, including catchment area maps for the School;

e. the response of the Diocese to the objection;

f. the Google Maps website, the Map Developers website and the government websites "Explore Education statistics" and "Get Information About Schools" (GIAS); and

g. information available on the websites of the School, Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE).

The Objection

6. The objection stated:

"I believe that some of the secondary school catchment areas for my address are not reasonable and therefore do not comply with Section 1.14 of the Schools Admissions

Code which states that 'catchment areas must be designed so that they are reasonable and clearly defined.'

I do not find the catchment areas to be reasonable because Lancashire County Council have told me that my address in Buckshaw Village is in the catchment area, or GPA as it is referred to in Lancashire, for three schools but my child would not be able to get a place at two out of the three schools as we live too far away. In contrast, the closest secondary school to my home, has a catchment area that covers the majority of Buckshaw Village but excludes an area that includes my address. The catchment areas have remained unchanged despite annual consultations by the Council. The combined effects of these two contradictory situations leads to unfairness for families living in this area in terms of being able to access these schools."

7. The objector mentions the secondary school that is closest to her home, and for which her address is not in catchment: this is BHS. The objector refers to three other schools, for which her address is in catchment: these are Parklands High School (Parklands), Albany Academy (Albany) and Southlands High School (Southlands). These are academy schools for which the Local Authority is not the admission authority. The objector confirmed to me that she wished to object only to the catchment area of BHS and did not wish to raise any objection in respect of the academy schools. GIAS (which gives straight line distances) shows that BHS is the only secondary school within five miles of the objector's address for which the LA is the admission authority.

8. The objection concerns the exclusion, from the catchment area of BHS, of part of Buckshaw village. An approximation of the area of the village which is not included in the catchment area is included as Appendix B to this determination. For the sake of ease in this determination, I refer to the area in question as 'the contested area'.

9. The objector asserts that the catchment area of the School is unreasonable and therefore does not comply with paragraph 1.14 of the Code. That paragraph states:

"Catchment areas **must** be designed so that they are reasonable and clearly defined. Catchment areas do not prevent parents who live outside the catchment of a particular school from expressing a preference for the school."

10. The objector also asserts that the arrangements result in unfairness. Paragraph 1.8 of the Code requires that oversubscription criteria are fair. That paragraph states:

"Oversubscription criteria **must** be reasonable, clear, objective, procedurally fair, and comply with all relevant legislation, including equalities legislation. Admission authorities **must** ensure that their arrangements will not disadvantage unfairly, either directly or indirectly, a child from a particular social or racial group, or a child with a disability or special educational needs, and that other policies around school uniform or school trips do not discourage parents from applying for a place for their child.

Admission arrangements **must** include an effective, clear, and fair tie-breaker to decide between two applications that cannot otherwise be separated."

Background

11. BHS is a co-educational, non-selective, secondary voluntary controlled school which provides education for children aged 11 to 16 years. The School is located in Leyland, a town to the south of Preston, in Lancashire. The published admission number (PAN) of the School for 2026 is 185. BHS was most recently inspected by Ofsted in February 2023 when it was judged to be 'Good'.

12. In the event of oversubscription, after the admittance of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) which names the School, priority for places in Year 7 is determined by application of the following criteria (in summary):

1. Looked after children (LAC) and previously looked after children (PLAC).

2. Children "for whom the Local Authority accepts that there are exceptional medical, social or welfare reasons which are directly relevant to the school concerned."

3. Children eligible for Services Premium.

4. Children living within the school's geographical priority area with older brothers or sisters attending the school when the younger child will start.

5. Children living within the school's geographical priority area.

6. Children living outside the school's geographical priority area with older brothers or sisters still attending the school when the younger child will start.

7. Children living outside the school's geographical priority area.

13. Where prioritisation of applicants is required within any one oversubscription criterion, this is achieved via distance measurements with those living closest to the School afforded highest priority.

14. The arrangements prioritise applicants on the basis of residence within a "Geographical Priority Area" (or GPA). This is a catchment area. The Code, in its glossary, defines catchment areas as follows:

"A geographical area, from which children may be afforded priority for admission to a particular school. A catchment area is part of a school's admission arrangements and must therefore be consulted upon, determined, and published in the same way as other admission arrangements."

15. The August 2024 email indicates some confusion on this matter. In that email the LA states:

> "We do not have catchment areas as a catchment area would imply that if you lived within that you would be guaranteed a place at the school."

16. I asked the LA to provide an explanation of the above statement, including whether it is its view that a GPA differs from a catchment area. The LA responded as follows:

> "Advice has been sought from the LCC solicitor and the following was her response:
>
> The difference is that residence within a GPA doesn't guarantee a place at the school. A GPA is a fixed area, defined in a school's admissions policy, where children are given higher priority for admission to a community schools because they live closer that school to any other and where it would be difficult to secure a place at any other school in the locality.
>
> It places those who live locally at a higher priority in over subscription policies - the school can still admit outside the GPA, if applications allow."

17. The advice the LA has received is incorrect. A geographical area may be used to afford priority to applicants, as provided for by the Code; such an area is a catchment area as defined by the Code irrespective of any alternative terminology an admission authority may choose to use. Consequently, the terms 'geographical priority area' (or GPA) and 'catchment area' are synonymous in the arrangements and in this determination. Residence within a school's catchment area does not guarantee a place at the school. The purpose of adopting a catchment area is to afford a higher level of priority to applicants who live within its boundaries.

18. The School has a wide catchment area, encompassing rural and urban areas. The M65 motorway forms a rough border to the north of the catchment area; both the M6 and the M61 run north to south through it. Appendix A to this determination provides a catchment map supplied by the LA. I discuss the suitability of this map below. Within the catchment area are several towns and villages, including Clayton-le-Woods, Clayton Green and Leyland.

Consideration of Case

19. Catchment areas are commonly used in school admission arrangements, often with the purpose of ensuring that no child has an unreasonably long journey to school, or to ensure that the school in question serves the community local to it. However, there are other reasons why a catchment area may be in use and a variety of factors which may influence the design of such an area. Consequently, a child's catchment school may not necessarily be their closest school.

20. Paragraph 1.14 of the Code requires that catchment areas are reasonable and clearly defined. I will first consider whether the catchment area of BHS is clearly defined.

21. A catchment area map that forms part of the determined arrangements was supplied to me at the commencement of this case. I found this map to be unclear; it does not include all road names and it is not possible to determine from it accurately which addresses do and do not belong to the catchment area of the School. I asked the LA about this matter; it supplied a second map (Appendix A) and stated, “The map has been amended and road names are now visible.” I do not find this to be true. Not all roads are named on the amended map and it is not clear, where the catchment boundary cuts across a particular street, which addresses on that street are and are not within catchment.

22. For the sake of completeness, I asked the LA for the information that is available for parents regarding the catchment area of the School and where this may be found. It responded:

> “A number of parents contact the local authority regarding geographical priority areas when their child is in Key Stage 2. Families call the education office to obtain information regarding their preferred school.
>
> For many parents the information gathering begins when their child reaches Year 5, attending open evenings to discover if they live within the geographical priority area for their preferred school, analysing the historical data to see if they would have achieved place in previous admissions rounds.
>
> Many contact the local authority when the child is in Year 6 and an admissions information leaflet is sent to all parents at the beginning of the autumn term via the schools. This prompts parents to attend open evenings and look on the LCC website for the composite prospectus and relevant area supplements.
>
> Admissions information is available via the phone, an email, the website, our Facebook and X [formerly Twitter] accounts.
>
> Officers attend the School's Open Evening in the Autumn Term, to advise parents on admission arrangements, including the GPA. The Balshaw's Open Evening is attended by the Area Manager for School Admissions.
>
> That is also a section of the LCC website which provides access to the GPA maps.”

23. Parents should not be required to contact the LA or attend an open evening to understand the catchment area of the School. Catchment areas are a key part of admission arrangements and should be published as part of them or immediately accessible from them. The catchment area must be clearly defined; neither map which has been supplied to me fulfils this requirement. Any map used should be clear whether those living on the boundary line are in the catchment area or outside of it. Consequently, the arrangements must be revised to ensure compliance with the clarity required by paragraph 1.14 of the Code.

24. I will now consider the assertion that the catchment area is unreasonable. The Code uses the term 'reasonable' but does not define it. It is the requirement of public bodies, including admission authorities, that they must act reasonably in adopting any policy or making any decision. The common law test for 'unreasonableness' in this context is that, for a decision to be considered unreasonable, it would have to be a decision that no rational admission authority would have made having taken into account all relevant factors, placing sufficient weight upon each of those factors and disregarding any irrelevant factors.

25. I asked the Local Authority for its rationale for the use of a catchment area for BHS. That is, why it has chosen to prioritise applicants on the basis that they live within this particular area. It replied:

> "GPAs were introduced by the Local Authority when the DfE amended the School Admissions Code and introduced the Equal Preference System. When the Equal Preference system had been in operation for two years, it became evident that a number of families, living in rural areas were not securing a place at their nearest school. To provide a remedy, GPAs were drawn up for all community and voluntary controlled secondary schools [and a handful of primary schools].
>
> Over recent years, a significant number of community schools in Lancashire have converted to Academies leading to the GPAs becoming less useful operationally.
>
> At the time the GPAs were introduced, all non-faith schools were under the control of the Local Authority. In Chorley, three GPAs [Albany, Parklands and Southlands were all community schools].
>
> All of the addresses in Chorley were in a GPA of Albany, Parklands and Southlands.
>
> - Parklands academised on 1 September 2012, their GPA has since been amended.
> - Albany academised on 1 August 2012, their GPA has since been amended.
> - Southlands academised – 1 December 2017.
>
> The academisation of these schools has changed the local picture in respect of the priority of pupils for school places."

26. The LA has described a historical picture; the equal preference system was introduced in the 2007 Schools Admissions Code, some eighteen years ago. Indeed, the LA has said that the catchment areas it uses no longer fulfil the rationale which guided their introduction.

27. I asked the Local Authority for its rationale for the design of the School's catchment area. That is, how this has been decided and when it was most recently reviewed. I requested that the LA set out the factors that were taken into account when the catchment

area was last determined. The LA told me that the catchment area was determined “over 15 years ago” and gave the following rationale for its design:

> “At the point of inception, the GPA for Balshaw's was designed with consideration to:
>
> The distribution of pupils within the locality.
>
> Identifying a local school which pupils had priority for.
>
> A defined area, that aligned with civil parishes and could be easily described within admissions literature.
>
> Housing developments and how quickly they would be brought forward. Buckshaw Village did not exist at that time.
>
> The border of Chorley and South Ribble Districts was used for clarity and simplicity.
>
> The possibility of a new secondary school being established. This did not come forward as there was a decision to expand the capacity of local high schools, as the development of Buckshaw Village, did not progress as rapidly as first indicated.”

28. I asked the LA for a full rationale for why the contested area is not included in the catchment area of the School. It replied:

> “The housing estate had not been built when the GPA was established.”

29. Information supplied to me shows that there have been significant changes in the area since the catchment area was determined, including new housing developments and road layouts. Circumstances have changed and the LA has not taken these changes into account.

30. In not revising the catchment area in light of the changes of circumstances, the LA has failed to take into account factors relevant to its decision and has acted irrationally. I therefore find that the catchment area has not been designed on a rational basis. Consequently, the arrangements do not conform with the requirements for reasonableness set out in paragraphs 1.14 and 1.8 of the Code. I uphold the objection that the catchment area is unreasonable and the arrangements will need to be revised.

31. I will now consider whether the arrangements are fair. Fairness is a concept which, like that of reasonableness, is used in the Code but is not defined. Fairness can be described as a ‘protean concept’ in that it cannot be defined in universal terms; its requirements will depend on the circumstances. Fairness is focussed on the effect of the arrangements on any relevant group.

32. Not being able to gain a place at a specific school does not in itself constitute unfairness. The Explore Education Statistics website shows that for entry to secondary school in England in 2025, 83.5 per cent of applicants were made an offer of their first preference school; this means that 16.5 per cent were not. The LA provided data which

show that in its area, approximately one thousand nine hundred children were refused a place at their first preference school in each of 2024 and 2025, equivalent to 14 per cent of all applicants.

33. I stress here that all oversubscription criteria create advantage for some applicants and disadvantage to others; indeed, that is their purpose. I will undertake a balancing exercise, weighing the advantage which the arrangements afford to children who live within the catchment area of the School against any disadvantage they cause to children from the contested area who are excluded from that catchment area. Unfairness can be found when the disadvantage is considered to outweigh the advantage.

34. Parents may apply for a place for their child at any school of their choice; this does not have to be one for which they are in catchment or even one in the local authority area in which they live. Some schools will inevitably attract more applications that others; there are many reasons why a school may be popular and no child (except one with an EHCP which names a school) can be guaranteed a place at the school which their parents most want them to attend.

35. The LA provided the data below: table 1 sets out the total number of applicants and offers made for places at the School on National Offer Day in recent years; table 2 the number of children with EHCPs offered a place at the School and the numbers of children who were offered a place under each oversubscription criterion, plus the number of first preference applicants for the School. The PAN of the School was 185 in each of the years shown.

Table 1: Total applications to the School, and offers made on National Offer Day, from 2022 to 2025.

	2022 entry		**2023 entry**		**2024 entry**		**2025 entry**	
	Applied	Offers	Applied	Offers	Applied	Offers	Applied	Offers
Total applications and offers	601	185	646	185	612	185	622	185

Table 2: The number of children with EHCPs offered a place at the School, the numbers offered a place under each oversubscription criterion, and the number of first preference applications, from 2022 to 2025

Criterion	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	**2025**
EHCP	2	3	3	2
LAC/PLAC	5	2	2	7
Social/Medical/Welfare	0	0	0	0

Criterion	2022	2023	2024	2025
In GPA with sibling	60	53	57	56
In GPA no sibling	118	128	124	120
Out of GPA with sibling	0	0	0	0
Out of GPA no sibling	0	0	0	0
LA allocated	0	0	0	0
First preference	231	237	220	212

36. The data demonstrate that BHS is a popular, oversubscribed school. In the four-year period 2022 to 2025, no child residing outside of the catchment area (and thus no child in the contested area) was admitted to the School (other than any who had an EHCP that named the school or who was admitted under the LAC/PLAC criterion). It seems likely that this situation will continue and no party has made any suggestion to the contrary.

37. I asked the LA for its view of secondary provision for families that live in the contested area. It replied:

> "The LA does not have a view of which schools children should attend, because the popularity of schools and the way parental preferences are expressed can change with each admission round, which is largely due to 'the perception' of the school. Similarly, we are unable to gauge the exact likelihood of gaining a place. Historical data is provided to parents, outlining the likelihood of securing a place based on the intake in previous admissions rounds. Parents are advised to put their preferred school as first preference, then select two sensible preferences as Options 2 and 3, naming local schools they can travel to, and where they are more likely to secure a place."

38. The objection referred to the difficulty of securing a place at an alternative school to BHS:

> "When I discovered that we live too far away from Parklands and Albany to get a place, it seemed obvious to look at Balshaw's as it is the secondary school closest to my home. . . As the school is oversubscribed and we do not live in the GPA, my child does not have any chance of a place. The closest school we are in the GPA for, Parklands, and therefore could expect to have some degree of priority, is too far away from my home for my child to have any chance of a place. This is also the same situation for Albany Academy. . . the current design of the GPAs put an area of Buckshaw Village at a significant disadvantage in terms of getting places at these schools. I also don't see how it can be considered reasonable when the GPA for

Parklands covers the whole of Buckshaw Village yet, the school has confirmed that no child living here has been admitted for a number of years."

39. The objector is within catchment for Parklands, Albany and Southlands (the three schools). The objector's address is, according to GIAS, 1.95 miles from Parklands, 3.2 miles from Albany and 2.91 miles from Southlands. I have consulted the catchment area maps for the three schools as published on the LA website. It is not entirely clear from those maps which addresses do and do not belong to each school's catchment area. Nevertheless, it is apparent that all of the contested area (and all of Buckshaw village) is within the catchment area of Parklands; at least some of the contested area is in catchment for each of Albany and Southlands.

40. The objector refers to living "too far away" from Parklands and Albany to be able to gain admittance. The LA provided the data in table 3, showing the number of in-catchment children refused a place at each of the three schools and the furthest distance on which an offer of a place was made.

Table 3: The number of in-catchment children refused a place at each of the three schools and the furthest distance on which an offer of a place was made, in each of 2023, 2024 and 2025.

School name	Number refused / Last offering distance	2023	2024	2025
Albany Academy	Number refused	62	12	14
	Last offering distance	1.096 miles	2.2131 miles	1.427 miles
Parklands High School	Number refused	53	57	39
	Last offering distance	1.1428 miles	1.0234 miles	1.1214 miles
Southlands High School	Number refused	0	0	0
	Last offering distance	N/A	N/A	N/A

41. In recent years, no child from the contested area has been offered a place at either Parklands or Albany (both of which Ofsted have judged to be 'Good' schools) on the basis of distance. Southlands, the contested area's third catchment school, which was found by

Ofsted to 'Require Improvement' at its most recent inspection in February 2024 and the previous inspection of December 2021, is undersubscribed. The LA stated:

> "Over the last 10 years, there have always been places available for children residing in the Chorley District at Southlands Academy, at the time of intake."

42. If children from the contested area were included in the catchment area for BHS, it is possible that they may displace other applicants to the School who already live within the catchment area; both groups of children would fall under the same oversubscription criterion and their relative priority for BHS would depend (leaving aside admissions under higher criterions, which have prioritised small numbers of children in recent years) on distance between their homes and the School.

43. Table 4 shows the number of places offered to applicants to BHS on the basis of distance in recent years, and the last offering distance and first distance refused.

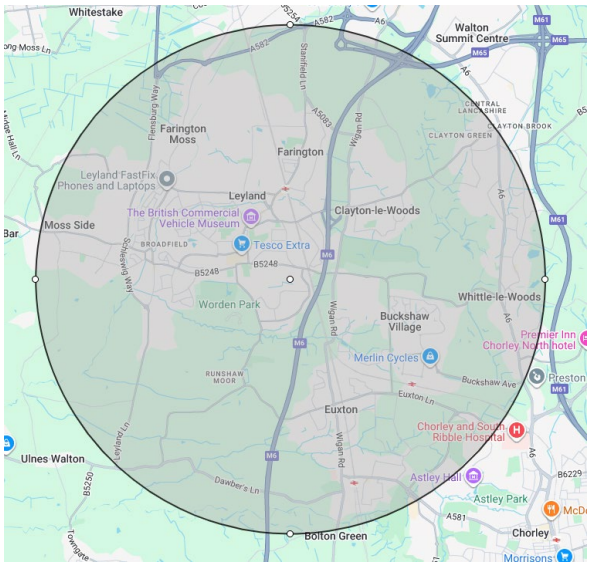
Table 4: The number of places offered to applicants to the School on the basis of distance in each of 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, and the last offering distance and first distance refused

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Places offered on distance	118	128	124	120
Last distance offered (miles)	1.306	2.378	2.3227	1.3714
First distance refused (miles)	1.3225	2.3842	2.3237	1.4073

44. I plotted data from table 4 using the Map Developers' 'draw a circle' website tool to create figures 1 and 2 below. That tool allows a user to input a postcode and a distance from it. The tool then draws a circle, the radius of which is the distance input, onto a Google map. I stress that this is not the same methodology as that used by the LA when allocating places. However, it does provide a means by which it is possible to see whether applicants from the contested area may have been admitted to BHS in recent years

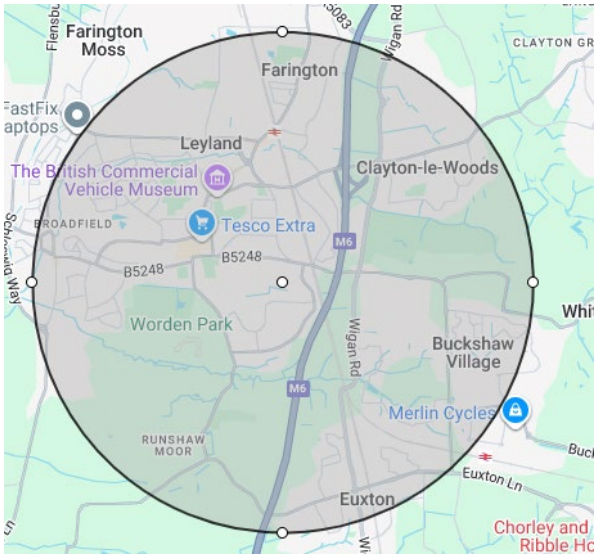
45. Figure 1 shows a circle centred on BHS with a radius of 2.32 miles. This is approximately equal to the last offering distance in 2024.

Figure 1.



46. Figure 2 shows a circle centred on BHS with a radius of 1.37 miles. This is approximately equivalent to the last distance offered in 2025.

Figure 2.



47. I note the following:

47.1. The objector's address is, according to GIAS, 1.18 miles from the School. This is within the last offering distance in each of the years shown in table 3.

47.2. All of the contested area was within the last offering distance in 2024.

47.3. Much of the contested area was within the last offering distance in 2025.

47.4. Both figure 1 and figure 2 exclude large parts of the School's catchment area, including all of that to the east of the M61. In figure 2, all of Clayton Green is also excluded.

48. Although the arrangements prioritise children living in the catchment area, in practice they do not advantage children living in large parts of that area. Children in much of the catchment area are highly unlikely to gain a place at BHS due to the distance from their homes to the School.

49. The arrangements cause disadvantage to children living in the contested area. This disadvantage arises from exclusion from the catchment area, not from the distance which they live from the School.

50. The January 2025 email states:

> "The GPA for Balshaw's has always included Clayton Green, Cuerden, Clayton-le-Woods, and Clayton Brook since it was established. In the interim the land has been developed and those pupils living there also have priority for Balshaw's. This was not a concern at the time the development was established, however, it is recognised that as pressure on places have increased in both Balshaw's and the Chorley schools it will feel unfair to those on Buckshaw Village who are now losing out on a place at Parklands as they are too far away within the GPA for that school to gain a place."

51. It seems that the LA recognises that there may be a feeling, at the very least, of unfairness from parents of children living in the contested area. In determining whether such unfairness exists I have taken account of the following:

51.1. No party has asserted that the design of the catchment area is necessary to prioritise children who may otherwise find it difficult to secure a school place.

51.2. According to GIAS there are six other secondary schools within three miles of BHS, and eighteen within 5 miles. No party has asserted that applicants from any part of the School's catchment are limited only to admission to BHS.

51.3. The size of the contested area is small compared to the catchment area as a whole; it seems likely therefore that the scale of any disadvantage to existing in-catchment children that may arise from the inclusion of the contested area in the catchment area would be small.

52. I make it clear that there is no legal requirement for admission arrangements to prioritise children living closest to the school in question. As I have already set out, residence in a catchment area does not and cannot guarantee admission to any school, and all admission arrangements advantage some applicants over others. Nevertheless, I have weighed the advantage which the arrangements afford to in-catchment children against the disadvantage they cause to children who live in the contested area and have found that the disadvantage to that latter group of children outweighs the advantage to the former group.

53. I find that in excluding the contested area, the catchment area of BHS is unfair. Consequently, the arrangements are contrary to paragraph 1.8 of the Code. I uphold the objection that the catchment area of the School is unfair and the arrangements will need to be revised.

54. I note that the January email 2025 stated:

> "Officers have discussed the possibility of changes to the GPA for Balshaw's with the Head teacher and Chairman of Governors and they do not wish to amend the GPA for the school."

55. For the avoidance of doubt, the LA is the admission authority of the School and it is the responsibility of the LA to revise the catchment area to comply with my determination.

Determination

56. In accordance with section 88H(4) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I uphold the objection to the admission arrangements for September 2026 determined by Lancashire County Council for Balshaw's Church of England High School.

57. By virtue of section 88K(2) the adjudicator's decision is binding on the admission authority. The School Admissions Code requires the admission authority to revise its admission arrangements within two months of the date of the determination, unless an alternative timescale is specified by the adjudicator. In this case I determine that the arrangements must be revised by 3 October. This deadline will ensure that the arrangements are revised within a reasonable time before the deadline for applications to be made for 2026 entry.

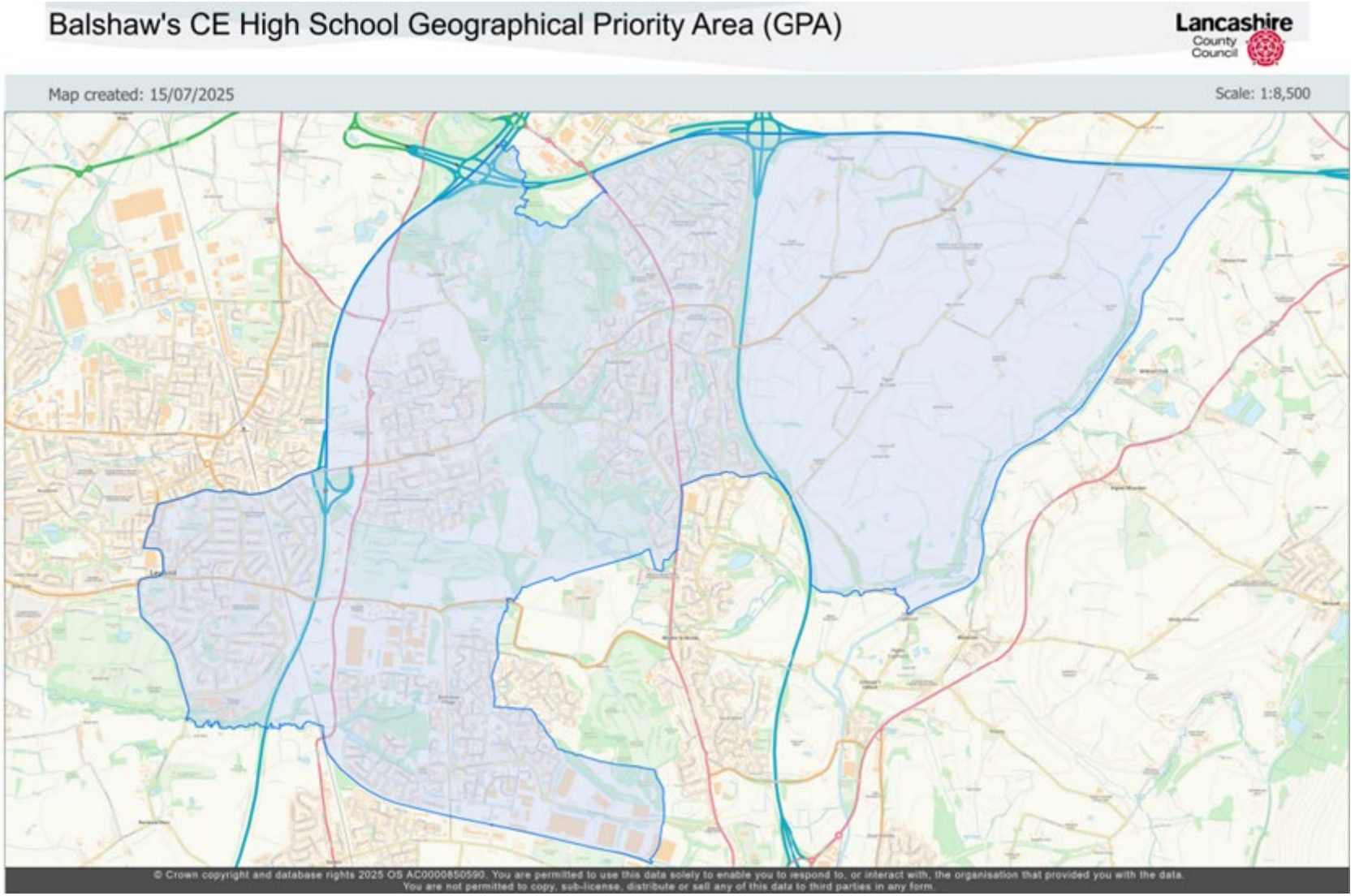
Dated: 22 September 2025

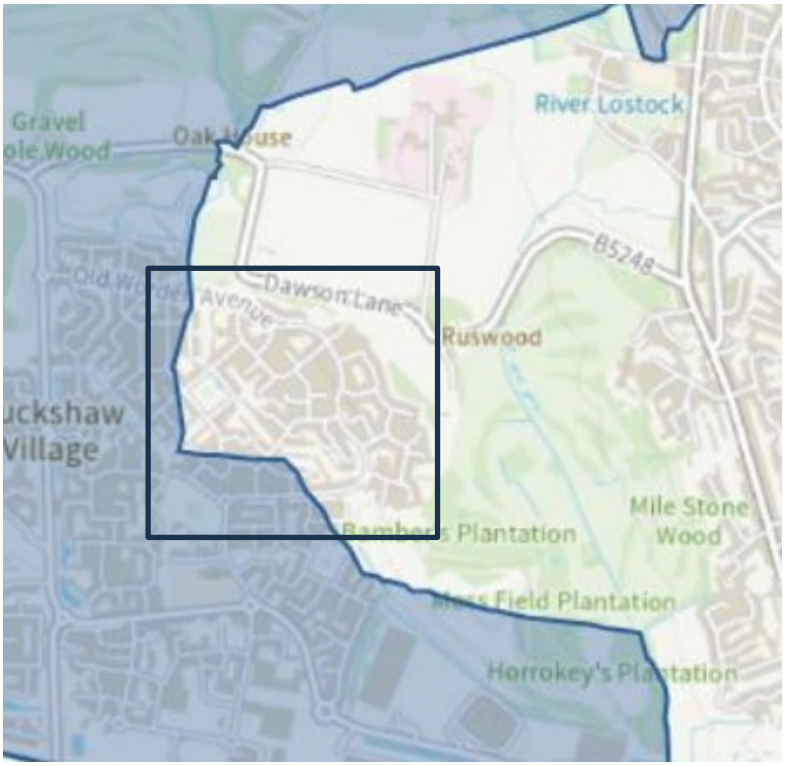
Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jennifer Gamble

Appendix A

Catchment area map for BHS.



Appendix B

The area within the rectangle below that is not within the catchment area of the School shows an approximation of the ‘contested area’ which is the subject of the objection.