



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	VAR2633
Admission Authority:	The governing body of Glastonbury Thorn School
Local Authority:	Milton Keynes City Council
Date of decision:	2 October 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 the governing body of Glastonbury Thorn School, for September 2026.

I determine that the published admission number, for admissions to the Reception Year in 2026, shall be 30.

The referral

1. The governing body of Glastonbury Thorn School (the Admission Authority; the School) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for the School for September 2026 (the Arrangements).
2. The School is a foundation school for children aged four to seven, in the area of Milton Keynes City Council. It is a co-educational school with no designated religious character. The School was judged to be 'Good' by Ofsted at its last inspection in June 2025.
3. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) of the School, which applies to admissions to the reception year (Year R), be reduced from 60, as determined, to 30 for September 2026.

Jurisdiction and procedure

4. 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”.

5. The Arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 14 July 2025. This is after the deadline, in accordance with paragraph 1.49 of the Code, for determining arrangements by 28 February in the determination year. This does not, nevertheless, affect the standing of the Arrangements, or my power to consider them or the proposed variation.
6. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code.
7. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.
8. In considering the variation request, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.
9. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:
 - the referral from the Admission Authority dated 13 August 2025, and supporting documents;
 - the determined Arrangements for 2026 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
 - responses from the governing body of the School and the Local Authority to my requests for further information;
 - maps, including Google Maps and those showing the location of the School; and
 - information available on gov.uk websites (including the ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS) and ‘Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool’ (FBIT) websites), and the websites of the Local Authority, the School, and Ofsted.

10. 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. A consultation also allows for objections to the adjudicator. None of this is afforded by the variation process.
11. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027 have not yet been determined. This means that if I decide to vary the Arrangements for 2026 by reducing the School's PAN from 60 to 30 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years.
12. In the interest of dealing speedily with this and other requests for variations for schools, I have not considered other aspects of the Arrangements. Therefore, nothing in this determination should be taken as indicating that other aspects of the Arrangements do or do not conform with the requirements relating to admissions.

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 proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances.
14. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 60 to 30 for entry to Year R in September 2026. The Local Authority supports the proposal.
15. The Admission Authority told me the following reason for it seeking a variation for the School –

"Milton Keynes, like many other local authority areas, is experiencing significant surplus places in the primary sector due to a fall in the birth rate. This means that families have more choice when selecting primary schools and schools that were historically full and popular are being impacted by this reduced demand, particularly in the older and more established areas of Milton Keynes.

The PAN of 60 was determined in the admission arrangements for the 2020/21 academic year. Since this time, the number of children born in Milton Keynes has fallen, in line with national trends, which has led to a significant surplus of places for children starting school, particularly impacting schools within established communities such as the one Glastonbury Thorn is part of.

This fall in demographics in this established community has made Glastonbury Thorn’s pupil numbers volatile over the years with the school significantly relying on attracting out of catchment children. This volatility can be seen in Year R September 2024 numbers which saw the school allocated just 37 children, meaning 2 class teachers were required having a significant detrimental impact on the school’s budget.”

16. I have considered the latest available data to form a view about the sufficiency of school places in the local area if the PAN of the School is reduced from 60 to 30 for 2026. 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 parental preference, and whether the proposed reduction is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.
17. 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 and the schools within those areas, for this purpose. The School is based in the planning area of Denbigh Liaison Group, and I have considered the data that the Local Authority has provided for that area.
18. In the planning area there are five schools, including the School, for which the usual year of entry is Year R. The data set out in Table 1 show the number of Year R places and the number of children admitted to, or forecast to require a place at, those schools. Table 1 also demonstrates the effect of the proposed PAN reduction for the School on surplus places in the planning area.

Table 1: Places available at schools within the planning area, and the number of children admitted to, or forecast to require a place at, those schools

	2024	2025	2026	2027
Number of places in Year R at schools in the planning area (with a PAN of 60 at the School)	300	300	300	300
Number of children admitted (2024 and 2025), forecast to require places (2026 and 2027)	266 (186 from catchment areas)	286 (181 from catchment areas)	168	169

	2024	2025	2026	2027
Vacant places	34	14	132	131
Vacant places as a percentage	11.3	4.7	44.0	43.7
Number of places in Year R if variation approved (with a PAN of 30 at the School in 2026 and onwards)	NA	NA	270	270
Vacant places if variation approved	NA	NA	102	101
Vacant places as a percentage if variation approved	NA	NA	37.8	37.4

19. In providing the data shown at Table 1 above, the Local Authority explained that these five schools have recently been admitting a sizeable number of children to Year R from outside of their respective catchment area. The Local Authority stated –

“Forecasts [in 2026 and 2027] are based on potential catchment demand from new housing and births. The above table shows that only 63% of allocations were made to children that live within the catchment area of the liaison group of schools in 2025 and 70% in 2024.”

20. The Department for Education’s 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. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system.” From the data above I note that the proportion of vacant places in the planning area would, according to the forecast numbers for 2026 and 2027, remain well above the two per cent if I agreed the proposed variation.
21. I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 30 for 2026, there would be sufficient places within the planning area for any children who might be seeking a Year R place.
22. I turn now to the demand for places at the School. Table 2 shows the number of children admitted to the School in 2024 and 2025, and the forecast numbers for the next two years. The table uses the proposed PAN of 30 for 2026 onwards.

Table 2: The number of children admitted to the School in 2024 and 2025, and the forecast number of places required in 2026 and 2027

	2024	2025	2026	2027
The PAN for the School	60	60	30	30
Number of first preferences	22	32	NA	NA
Number of children admitted (2024 and 2025), forecast to require places (2026, 2027)	36 (12 from catchment area)	57 (17 from catchment area)	40	34
Surplus places	24	3	-10	-4

23. Table 2 shows that in recent years, the number of first preference applications has been slightly below or above the proposed PAN of 30. Table 2 also shows that the number of children admitted to the School has been above the number of first preference applications. A first preference is the school that a parent most wants their child to attend; a child will be offered a place at the highest preference school possible depending on demand for schools and their oversubscription criteria. It is likely that some children have been admitted to the School because they were refused admission to a school for which their parents had expressed a higher preference.

24. Table 2 also shows that in each of 2026 and 2027, some 40 and 34 children have been forecast to require a place at the School. With a reduced PAN of 30 this seems to result, if the forecast turns out to be accurate, in some potential frustration of parental preference. In this light, the Admission Authority explained –

“Projections are based on potential demand within the catchment area. However, recent trends in parental preference indicate that only 41% of catchment area children attend the school. For September 2025, this has fallen further to just 33%. This decline is in the context of a significant surplus of approximately 130 places across the liaison group of schools including Glastonbury Thorn. As a result, it is increasingly likely that parents will secure places at schools outside their catchment area. Glastonbury Thorn’s reliance on attracting out of catchment children from a diminishing pool is no longer a viable or sustainable model and cannot continue in its current form.”

25. It appears that parents living locally to the School have been willing to travel further to take their children to other schools. In response to my request, the Local Authority gave a similar reading of the forecast data at Table 2 –

“If the PAN is reduced to 30, it is highly unlikely that Glastonbury Thorn School will decline applications for catchment children as a result of parental preference. Parental preference trends in recent years indicate that only 41% of catchment children attend

the school. This has reduced to 33% for September 2025. This is in the context of a significant surplus within the liaison group of approximately 130 places and a wider city surplus of around 800 places. We therefore do not believe that any children will be displaced or not receive a school of preference as a result of this proposed change.”

26. I will now consider the impact on the School of my approving, or not approving, the proposed variation.
27. The School is one 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 (paragraph 2.16 of the Code). The infant class size regulations apply to Year R, Year 1, and Year 2.
28. As schools are largely funded on the number of pupils and the highest costs to a school budget are staff, it is generally considered financially efficient to have infant classes that have 30 pupils or close to, but below, 30 pupils. If a school has classes that are many less than 30, then this can mean that the income from the number of pupils is less than the costs of providing a class. If this happens over several classes, a school can have severe financial challenges.
29. The request for the variation refers to financial pressures faced by the School and the wish to align class organisation and staffing to the number of children. The situation the School and the Local Authority wish to avoid is staffing classes of a size that are not financially viable. The governing body of the School stated in the referral form –

“In the above context, Glastonbury Thorn School’s current admission model places significant strain on the school’s budget and long-term viability.

In May 2025, Milton Keynes City Council issued the school a Notice of Concern, requiring urgent action to address a growing budget deficit. In response, the school has been working closely with the [Local Authority] to identify solutions. A key action agreed upon is for the school to urgently transition to a 1 Form Entry (1FE) model for the September 2026 academic year to help stabilise the school's finances whilst we investigate the longer term vision for the school. At present, another year with a reception intake below the level needed to support two full classes would worsen the deficit. One option we are investigating is the possibility of longer term vertical grouping for KS1 students - reducing PAN to 30 for the September 2026 intake will allow us to continue with this model if it is deemed successful from both an educational and financial perspective.

Another year with a Reception (Year R) intake below the level needed to support two full classes would worsen the financial deficit.”

30. The FBIT website shows that for financial year ending March 2025, the School had an in-year deficit of £78K, and a negative revenue reserve of £184K.
31. The Local Authority commented –
- “The school is facing an incredibly challenging financial position with a significant forecast budget deficit position increasing to £986K by 2027/28 unless fundamental changes are made. Glastonbury Thorn’s reliance on attracting out of catchment children from a diminishing pool is no longer a viable or sustainable model and cannot continue in its current form. Continuing with the five-class model beyond the 2025/26 academic year is not financially viable. It is anticipated that numbers across the school will reduce over the coming year, allowing the school to move to a four-class model. However, for this to be achievable, it is essential to reduce the PAN to 30 for September 2026 entry.”
32. Having considered all the matters above, my reasoning could be summarised as follows –
- If the proposed variation is approved, parents can consider preferences and make their applications for 2026 in the knowledge that the PAN of the School is 30. Any parent who is not successful in securing a place for their child at the School will likely be able to secure a place at another local school in the planning area (all within two miles of distance from the School), in light of the projected vacant Year R rate as set out in Table 1 above, apart from the spare capacity beyond the planning area in Milton Keynes as noted by the Local Authority. There is compelling evidence that a reduction in the PAN to 30 would allow the School to plan accordingly, make the best use of its resources, and in the longer term, improve the School’s financial position.
 - If the proposed variation is not approved, the School would be obliged to offer a Year R place up to the existing PAN of 60 for any applicant in 2026/27, according to the Arrangements determined by the Admission Authority in July 2025. If just over 30 children were to be admitted to the School, then the School could have to arrange its classes to meet the requirements of the infant class size regulations, and this will require a substantial cost to employ a teacher. There remains a serious risk of a significantly negative financial and organisational impact on the School, with detriment to those children already at the School and to others who may lose out, if funding has to be diverted to pay for the provision of an extra class for 2026/27.
33. Taking everything into consideration, and on balance, I find that the variation is justified by the circumstances and approve it.

Determination

34. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by the governing body of Glastonbury Thorn School, for September 2026.
35. I determine that the published admission number, for admissions to the Reception Year in 2026, shall be 30.

Dated: 2 October 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jackie Liu