



Determination

Case reference:	VAR2638
Admission Authority:	The Governing Body for St Paul's Catholic Primary School in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth
Local Authority:	Portsmouth City Council
Date of decision:	31 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 for St Paul's Catholic Primary School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission in 2026/27, the published admission number will be 30.

The referral

1. The Governing Body (the Admission Authority) for St Paul's Catholic Primary School (the School) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for the School for 2026/27.
2. The School is a voluntary aided co-educational school for children aged two to eleven in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth. It is located in the local authority area of Portsmouth City Council (the Local Authority).
3. The School has a Roman Catholic religious character, and the religious authority for the school is the Diocese of Portsmouth (the Diocese).
4. The parties to the request are the Admission Authority, the Local Authority and the Diocese.
5. The proposed variation, which has the support of the Diocese and the Local Authority, is that the published admission number (the PAN) for 2026/27 is reduced from 45 to 30.

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 Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code.

8. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.

9. In considering the variation request, I have had regard to all relevant legislation and the Code.

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

- the referral from the Admission Authority received on 10 September 2025;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- responses (received in October 2025) from the Local Authority, the School and the Diocese to my requests for further information; and
- information available on gov.uk websites, including ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS), and on the websites of the School and the Local Authority.

11. In the interests of dealing speedily with this and the many other requests for variations at this time, I have not considered other aspects of the admission 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

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 here that if I decide to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27 by reducing the PAN from 45 to 30 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years, so that the PAN could be set at 30 for 2027/28 and beyond without any need for consultation.

14. 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.

15. The major change in circumstances relied upon by the Admission Authority is set out in the referral as follows:

"[The] Number On Roll for September 2025 is lower than predicted (31 out of 45) and with falling numbers across the authority and nationally predicted over the next 5 years it is no longer financially viable to continue with small classes in year groups. The school currently has a deficit budget and has a recovery plan in place – part of this is to permanently reduce the PAN to 30.

Reducing to a PAN of 30 will provide the school with greater financial stability from which to improve the overall budget position.

We have been in discussions with the Local Authority to ensure that the capacity across the other primary schools in the area fulfil the spaces required for the next 5 years.

[A PAN of 30] will ensure that the school is full and classes across the school continue to be full to capacity ensuring maximum funding for class sizes for full time teachers and assist the school in reducing their significant budget deficit."

16. 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 were to be reduced as proposed. 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.

Overall demand for Reception Year (YR) places in the area

17. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty, it 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.

18. The Local Authority has supplied me with data for the “King Richard Planning Area”, the planning area in which the School is located, as follows:

Table 1: Reception Intake for the King Richard Planning Area

Reception Intake	NOR	Current Sum of PANs	Current surplus places	Sum of PANs if proposed variation is approved	Surplus places if proposed variation is approved
2025/26	172 (actual)	225	53 (24%)	N/A	N/A
2026/27	164 (July 2025 forecast)	195	31 (16%)	180	16 (9%)
2027/28	158 (July 2025 forecast)	195	37 (19%)	180	22 (12%)

19. From the above data, I am satisfied that a reduction of the School's PAN to 30 for 2026/27 would leave sufficient surplus capacity in the planning area for admissions in 2026/27, and that, if the PAN for 2027/28 were also to be set at 30, there would be sufficient surplus capacity for admissions in 2027/28.

Places at the School

20. I now turn to the number of children at the School and the reasons given by the School in support of the variation approval request. The request for approval of the proposed 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 (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.

21. The School has provided me with a breakdown of the number of children in each year group in the school and how they are organised into eleven classes. There are

currently 32 children in YR, organised into two classes. The rest of the School is taught in mixed age classes as follows:

- Year 1 and Year 2 – 72 children taught in three mixed age classes
- Year 3 and Year 4 – 77 children taught in three mixed age classes
- Year 5 and Year 6 - 86 children taught in three mixed age classes

22. The School points out that if it could be certain that no more than 30 children were to be admitted into YR in 2026/27, it would be able to plan with certainty for one YR class and ten classes in total in that academic year, one fewer than the eleven classes currently operating. I note here that had a PAN of 30 been in place for 2025/26, the school would now be operating with one fewer class than is the case at present, with only two fewer children. I also note that whilst a PAN of 30 in 2026/27 might potentially lead to a degree of frustration of parental preference, the number of families so affected would be likely to be very small, and those parents who were unsuccessful in securing a place for their child at the School would have been able to express their preferences in full knowledge of the reduced number of places at the School and the potential consequences of this.

23. To support the variation request, the School has provided me with an insight into its financial position. Whilst it had a cumulative surplus of £30,605 at the end of the 2024-25 financial year, there is a projected cumulative deficit of £104,565 for the end of the 2025-26 financial year which rises to £272,373 at the end of the following year. I consider that this is compelling evidence of the financial challenges facing the School. By enabling the school to plan with certainty for one fewer class in 2026/27, which would reduce the staffing costs by significantly more than any loss in per-pupil funding, the proposal removes any financial and organisational risks of having to plan for two YR classes rather than one. Were two classes to be required, it is likely that the net cost of staffing the extra class would add to the challenges of the School's financial position, and hence to its ability to meet the needs of the existing children on roll.

24. Having considered all the matters above, my reasoning can be summarised as follows:

- a. The proposed variation does not give rise to any concerns about the sufficiency of YR places in the planning area for 2026/27 or 2027/28.
- b. The proposed variation may give rise to a limited degree of frustration of parental preference for the School in 2026/27 (and similarly in 2027/28).
- c. If the proposed variation is not approved, there remains the risk of a significantly negative financial and organisational impact on the School, with detriment to those children already at the School, and to any others who may be adversely

affected should funding have to be diverted to pay for the provision of an extra class for 2026/27.

25. After carefully weighing the above factors, I conclude that the proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances, and I approve it.

Determination

26. 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 for St Paul's Catholic Primary School for 2026/27.

27. I determine that for admission in 2026/27, the published admission number will be 30.

Dated: 31 October 2025

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Clive Sentance