Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	**VAR2648**
Admission Authority:	**The Governing Body for Altrincham Church of England (Aided) Primary School, Altrincham, Cheshire**
Local Authority:	**Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council**
Date of decision:	**7 November 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 Altrincham Church of England (Aided) Primary School, for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2026/27, the published admission number shall be 30.

The referral

1. The Governing Body (the Admission Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for Altrincham Church of England (Aided) Primary School (the School) for 2026/27.

2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged three to eleven years in Altrincham, Cheshire. It is co-educational and has a Church of England religious character. The Diocese of Chester (the Diocese) is the School's religious body. The School is located in the area of Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council (the Local Authority).

3. The School was judged to be 'Good' by Ofsted at its last inspection in January 2023.

4. Parties to the request are the Local Authority, the Diocese and the Governing Body of the School.

5. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 40 to 30 for admissions to Reception Year (YR) in the academic year beginning in September 2026.

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 Arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 25 September 2024.

8. The Admission Authority, supported by the Local Authority, has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code.

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

10. In considering the variation request, 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 18 September 2025 and supporting documents. I note that the referral and supporting documents were submitted to the OSA via the Local Authority on 24 October 2025;

    - the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;

    - responses from the Local Authority, the School and the Diocese to my requests for further information;

- a map showing the location of the School; and
- information available on gov.uk websites (including 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS), 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT) and Ofsted) and the websites of the School, the Local Authority and the Diocese.

12. I would like to extend my thanks to the Local Authority, the School and the Diocese for their responses to my requests for further information.

13. 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.

14. I note here that the Arrangements for 2027/28 have not yet been determined. This means that if I decide to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27 by reducing the PAN from 40 to 30 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years. Should I determine to reduce the PAN, then there will be no need to consult on a reduction to the PAN in 2027/28 as this would be carried forward from the amended 2026/27 arrangements. However, for the avoidance of doubt, there is nothing in the statutory scheme that would prevent the Admission Authority from consulting if it wished to do so; it is simply that it would not be required to.

Consideration of proposed variation

15. The Governing Body as the Admissions Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 40 to 30 for entry to YR in September 2026. The proposed variation has the support of the Local Authority and the Diocese.

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 Admission Authority told me that the reason for it seeking a variation for the School is:

"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 2027, 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 the

region who share similar demographics, with cost-of living factors driving out-migration from more affluent boroughs.

Due to the accelerated rate of change and despite a number of other reductions in PAN in the Altrincham planning area in 2025 and 2026, there continues to be an overprovision of school places in reception year which is impacting school budgets and the future demand for places in our planning area is expected to decrease further.

Altrincham CE School has traditionally had a PAN of 40, which previously would have required vertical grouping of classes. Currently, due to low numbers, we have a mixed nursery and reception class, plus one single class in each of the other year groups. The exception is in year 6 where we are currently operating two classes to support the local authority to meet temporary additional demand from in-year applicants in this year group. From September 2026, we expect to reduce to one class in Year 6.

The request is being made in order that we can change our school organisation to a single form of entry to protect our financial viability. The PAN of 40 is no longer financially viable, especially when the demand for places is significantly less than 30. The school is currently only staffed to take up to 30 in each year group and needs to change the PAN to protect this position."

18. The Diocese stated that it was:

"…happy to support the PAN reduction. Numbers on roll are falling in the area and, although the governors initially hoped that they would be able to maintain the PAN, the [School] has quite rightly identified the fact that numbers will not increase based on Projections in the area."

19. 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 40 to 30 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.

20. 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 Altrincham planning area of the Local Authority. There are 16 schools in the planning area, including the School, which admit children into YR.

21. Table 1 summarises the data supplied to me by the Local Authority for the schools in the planning area; the number of children admitted in each of the previous three years, including 2025; and the forecast numbers for 2026 and 2027.

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

	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
The sum of the PANs across the area	980	965	895	850	850*
The number of children admitted to YR or forecast to be admitted	734	716	725	628	627
The number of vacant places	246	249	170	222	223
The number of vacant places as a percentage of the total number of places	25.1	25.8	19.0	26.1	26.2

* The 2027 PANs for schools in the planning area have not been determined. This figure is based on the sum of the determined PANs for 2026.

22. Table 1 shows that there has been a very high number of vacant places for children entering YR in the planning area since 2023. The DfE document, "Basic need allocations 2026-27 and 2027-28: 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". Despite the Local Authority's actions to reduce the sum of the PANs across the planning area in recent years, the proportion of vacant places in the planning area remains considerably higher than two per cent and would remain so if I were to agree to the proposed variation for September 2026.

23. In response to my query about why the numbers of children forecast to require a place in YR in 2026 and 2027 (628 and 627 respectively) are so much lower than the numbers admitted in 2024 and 2025 (716 and 725 respectively), the Local Authority said:

    "The Altrincham planning area has been disproportionately disadvantaged by a sharply declining birth rate combined with cost of living factors meaning many families with young children are no longer able to afford to live in this largely affluent area. Previously, families moving into this area between birth and age 4 was also a driver of demand but this inbound migration rate has also significantly dropped."

24. From the data in Table 1, I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 30 for 2026/27, there would be sufficient places available in the planning area for any parents seeking a YR place for their child.

25. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. Table 2 summarises recent admissions to the School.

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

	2023	2024	2025
The PAN for the School	40	40	40
The number of first preferences	12	18	9
The number of children admitted to YR	14	20	11
The number of vacant places	26	20	29
The number of vacant places as a percentage	65.0	50.0	72.5

26. Table 2 shows that the number of parents selecting the School as their first preference for a YR place for their child was fewer than 30 over the last three years. At the current time, there is no information relating to forecast numbers for individual schools within the planning area for 2026/27. However, given the recent pattern of preferences, it is highly likely that any parent applying for a place at the school for their child would be successful with a PAN of 30. As the School is situated in an urban area and there are 18 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.

27. The School provided information about its current class structure and pupil numbers, as set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Current class structure and pupil numbers at the School (18 September 2025)

Year Group	Number of pupils	Number of classes
Year R	10 (16*)	1
Year 1	22	1
Year 2	25	1
Year 3	21	1
Year 4	27	1
Year 5	33	1
Year 6	58	2
Total	218 (224*)	8

* The YR class also includes six Nursery age children.

28. The School provided the following explanation for its current structure and future plans:

"The school is facing a perfect storm of reduced admissions and decreased funding. This situation could not have been foreseen, otherwise the school would have used the usual consultation period. The quicker the staffing structure can be considered, the less the negative financial impact on the school. This is why we are asking for these changes for 2026 rather than waiting for a consultation period.

Changing our PAN will enable the school to establish a structure for a simpler single form entry school which will be financially secure."

29. In response to my request for additional information, the School also stated:

"This decision [to request a reduction in PAN] was made following further consideration of the school's projected pupil numbers, financial position, and the ongoing impact of declining birth rates locally.

If the variation is not agreed, the school will remain vulnerable to unplanned increases in pupil numbers above 30. The school does not have the funding or infrastructure to provide the necessary staffing for additional pupils…

If the variation is agreed, it will allow the school to plan its staffing structure in line with the sustained decline in pupil numbers. This will enable the school, as far as possible, to protect existing staff while ensuring financial stability and maintaining high-quality provision for pupils."

30. 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 Year R, Year 1 and Year 2.

31. If the PAN remains at 40, the School would be required to admit any child during the 2026/27 academic year whose parents request a Reception place at the School until 40 children have been admitted. This could mean that classes would need to be reorganised and additional staff recruited during the year. This is potentially disruptive and unsettling for children and staff alike. By reducing the PAN to 30, the School will be able to plan with certainty knowing the number of classes and staff that will be required across the year. As schools are largely funded based on the number of pupils on their rolls and it is more financially efficient for primary schools to have classes of 30 or near to 30, the proposed reduction in PAN will also assist the School in planning a more sustainable financial future.

32. 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

33. 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 Altrincham Church of England (Aided) Primary School, for 2026/27.

34. I determine that for admission to Reception Year in 2026/27, the published admission number shall be 30.

Dated: 7 November 2025

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Catherine Crooks