



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	VAR2662
Admission Authority:	The Governing Body of Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School for Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School
Local Authority:	Hampshire County Council
Date of decision:	7 January 2026

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 Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School for Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School for 2025.

I determine that for admission to Reception in 2025/26 the Published Admissions Number for the school shall be 14.

The referral

1. The Governing Body of Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School (the Admission Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School (the School or Downland) for 2025/26 (the Arrangements).
2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged three to eleven years in Rockbourne. It is a co-educational school with a Church of England religious character.
3. The School was judged to be “Good” by Ofsted at its last inspection in September 2023.
4. The religious character of the School is Church of England. The religious authority for the School is The Diocese of Salisbury (the Diocese).

5. Parties to the request are the Admission Authority, Hampshire County Council, which is the local authority for the area where the School is situated (LA), and the Diocese.
6. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) for admissions to the Reception year at Downland for 2025/26 be reduced from 28 as determined to 14.

Jurisdiction and procedure

7. 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”.

8. The Arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 23 November 2023.
9. The Admission Authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified of the proposed variation in line with the Code.

I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction. In this case I have NOT also used my power under section 88I of the Act to consider the Arrangements as a whole and to determine whether or not they conform with the requirements relating to admissions and, if not, in what ways they do not so conform. 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.

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 November 2025;
 - the determined Arrangements for 2025/26 which were determined at a meeting of the Governing Body on 23 November 2023, and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
 - responses from the LA, the School and Diocese to my requests for further information;
 - maps, including Google Maps and those showing the location of the School; and
 - information available on websites (including the 'Get Information About Schools' (GIAS) and 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT)), the LA, the School and Ofsted;
12. I would like to extend my thanks to the LA, the School and Diocese for their responses to my requests for further information. Responses from the school have been speedy and thorough.
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 2025/2026 have been determined, with a PAN of 28. This means that if I approve the Admission Authority's request to vary the Arrangements for 2025/2026 as proposed, it will be for that academic year only and will not have a bearing on subsequent years.

Consideration of proposed variation

15. 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 in certain other limited and specified circumstances. I will consider below whether the proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances.
16. The Arrangements set out that the PAN for admission to Reception for 2025/2026 shall be 28 children
17. The Admission Authority has now proposed that the PAN be reduced to 14 children for 2025/2026. In 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 this PAN would have allowed all parents who ranked the school as their first preference to be offered places. At this moment in time the projected first place choices for 2026/2027 and the year after are somewhat higher

but as this determination only affects admissions in the current reception year, this does not concern me.

18. The Governing Body told me that the reason for it seeking a variation for the School is an unforeseen reduction in demand for places at the school. The Governing Body states:

“At the time of the statutory consultation period, the Admission Authority did not have access to information that would have indicated the significant reduction in demand that has since become apparent.”

19. Several factors contributed to this. The Governing Body has stated:

- **“Timing of Admissions Data**

The School does not receive detailed application information from Dorset Council until late March or early April each year, which is after the deadline for determining admission arrangements. As a result, the Admission Authority did not have visibility of the drop in demand during the period when it would have been possible to consult on a reduced PAN.

- **Participation Rate and Historical Intake Patterns**

The School’s weighted participation rate is approximately 200%, meaning that actual intake can be almost double the number suggested by initial small-area population forecasts. Historically, the School has also admitted a significant number of in-year applicants across the primary phase. These trends have made early prediction of final demand highly uncertain.

- **Governing Body Considerations**

When the matter was discussed with the Governing Body, the information available at that time did not support a reduction in the PAN. Based on previous years’ experience of higher-than-forecast demand, the Governing Body did not wish to restrict the School’s capacity prematurely or risk limiting access for local families.

- For these reasons, the Admission Authority did not have adequate or timely evidence to justify consulting on a reduced PAN prior to determination.”

20. It is for the Admission Authority to determine whether there has been a major change of circumstances. However, it is worth saying that my view is that these are valid grounds to seek a variation to the school’s PAN for 2025/2026.
21. The Governing Body has provided evidence showing they communicated this proposed variation to the Diocese in late 2025. The Diocese has raised no objection to the proposed variation, stating that their start point is a significant excess of places at Church of England schools now and in the future.

22. The availability of places in nearby infant schools is as follows:

Table 1: availability of places at local infant schools

School	Admitting Authority	LA	School capacity	Children on roll	Diocese	Distance
Fordingbridge	LA	Hampshire	180	148	Winchester	2.62 miles
Breamore Church of England Primary school	LA	Hampshire	120	75	Winchester	2.86 miles
Downton C of E VA Primary School	Governing Body	Wiltshire	270	282	Salisbury	4.04 miles
St. James First and Nursery School, Alderholt	LA	Dorset	180	125	Salisbury	4.12 miles

23. All the schools listed were rated as at least “Good” in their most recent Ofsted inspection.
24. There appears therefore to be a considerable over capacity of primary school places in the local area. However, the Governing Body has noted themselves a volatility of demand, first looking to increase their PAN for 2025/2026 and 2026/2027, but now looking to halve it at a very late stage for 2025/2026.
25. None of the schools listed above is closer than two miles from the school. In a rural area, a student moving close to the school in the first half of 2026, if the PAN is reduced to 14, might find themselves allocated a school place more than two miles away, albeit the schools concerned are all rated as “Good”. The nearest schools with places in Wiltshire and Dorset are more than four miles away. The Governing Body request for approval of a variation suggests that there will be a surplus of places of between ten per cent and 14 per cent in the planning area in the second half of the decade.
26. As at December 2025, the School roll is well below its capacity, with some unevenness between cohorts.

Table 2: Number of students on roll, December 2025

Reception	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
15	16	25	24	17	20	24	141

27. The Governing Body has submitted extensive modelling of its current financial situation, which in great part is a driver of the request for a variation. It is evident from the minutes of the Governing Body meetings from 2023 that at that stage the school was on course to balance its budget.
28. However the school forecast is for a cumulative deficit budget of £187,460 by 2027/2028. This is in spite of extensive assessment of spending across the piece, and the fund raising efforts of the parent body.
29. The school has submitted detailed accounts and minutes of meetings of the governing body. These show a detailed breakdown of planned reduction in provision and re-allocation of funds including expanding nursery provision using resources freed up by the change in school organisation following approval of the proposed variation. The variation to PAN proposed for 2025/2026 will not affect the budget outcome in that academic year. However, the school have flagged that as that small cohort move through the school, substantial savings can be made by using some mixed age class organisation going forward. The projected benefit in 2027/2028 of the proposed variation being approved would be a deficit of £90,132 in year compared with £191,939 if the proposed variation is not approved; the overall school account would stand at £219,261 in deficit instead of £379,419.
30. The revised PAN would allow the school to adopt mixed age teaching while staying within the limits imposed on infant class sizes imposed by The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 and in paragraph 2.16 of the Code. These provide that infant class sizes (Reception and Years 1 and 2) are limited to 30 where there is a single teacher.

Table 3: Class sizes following school re-organisation if the variation is approved.

Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Total
30	30	25	24	17	20	146

31. The LA has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the LA assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The LA uses planning areas, which are geographical areas and the schools within those areas, for this purpose. The LA has communicated that it was consulted on the proposed PAN reduction by the school as required, and has no concerns as to its ability to provide sufficient places for students needing Reception level education in 2025/2026.

32. I have considered the impact of decreasing admission numbers on the school's finances balanced against the impact reducing the School's PAN will have on meeting parental preference. Parents have a right to express a preference as to where their children go to school. However, admission authorities cannot give any guarantee that preferences will be met.
33. In this case, a term into the school year, there is minimal chance of frustrating parental preference if the proposed variation is approved. If the PAN is set at 14, no more children will be automatically offered a place if requested (although the right of appeal remains). If the PAN remains at 28, then any child or children would have to be admitted until July 2026 if applications for places are made. Admissions over the 14 currently in the School would mean that the School could not mix the current reception year and year 1 together in one class and make the planned savings because this would be in breach of the Infant Class Sizes Regulations.
34. I have tried to ensure that I have considered the competing needs of providing the school places that parents want for their children and improving the financial viability of the School.
35. The Governing Body has presented a compelling argument for the variation it proposes. The Governing Body have made clear efforts to respond swiftly to a sudden change in the number of children applying for places at the school, yet the adoption of mixed age teaching is one of the few capacity changes potentially able to begin to deliver the level of savings needed. The evidence is that the LA will be able to ensure there are sufficient school places in its area in 2025/2026 (and indeed within the relevant planning area) with a reduced PAN of 14 for that time.
36. I, therefore, approve the proposed PA variation, and the PAN for admission to Reception at the school in 2025/2026 is 14.
37. I note here that reducing the PAN does not reduce the overall capacity of the School unless accommodation is being removed from the premises. It is not being suggested that accommodation is being removed, and so the physical capacity of the School remains the same. Reducing the PAN will not change that. What this means is that should there be a need for the School to increase its PAN and / or admit more children in 2026/2027 than it currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the buildings for it to do so.

Determination

38. 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 Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School for Western Downland Church of England (Aided) Primary School for 2025.

39. I determine that for admission to Reception in 2025/26 the Published Admissions Number for the school shall be 14.

Dated: 7 January 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Patrick Storrie