



Case reference: **VAR2677**

Admission Authority: **The Governing Body for Christ the King Catholic Primary School, Reading**

Local Authority: **Reading Borough Council**

Date of decision: **20 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 for Christ the King Catholic Primary School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission to the 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 Christ the King Catholic Primary School (the School) for 2026/27.
2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged three to eleven years in Reading. It is co-educational and has a Roman Catholic religious character. The Diocese of Portsmouth (the Diocese) is the School's religious body. The School is located in the area of Reading Borough Council (the Local Authority).
3. Parties to the request are the Local Authority, the Diocese and the Governing Body of the School.
4. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 45 to 30 for admissions to Reception Year (YR) in the academic year beginning in September 2026.

Jurisdiction and procedure

5. 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”.

6. The Arrangements were determined by the Admission Authority on 10 December 2025. This is after the deadline for determining arrangements which was 28 February 2025. This does not affect the standing of the Arrangements or my power to consider the proposed variation.

7. The Admission Authority has confirmed 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 dated 15 December 2025 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- responses from the LA, the Diocese and the School 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) and 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' (FBIT)) and the websites of the School, the Local Authority and the Diocese.

11. 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.

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 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 45 to 30 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years.

14. In the interests of dealing speedily with this request for a variation, 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

15. The Governing Body as the Admissions Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 45 to 30 for entry to YR in September 2026.

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:

"The birth rate in the local area has decreased, so our pupil numbers have fallen, meaning we are no longer operating at full capacity for the 45 PAN in the majority of the school. As a result, we now have some classes with 30–35 pupils and others that are significantly smaller. Despite reduced class sizes, we are still required to employ a full teacher for each class, which makes the current arrangements financially unsustainable.

The decline in pupil numbers has created significant financial strain, as full staffing levels must be maintained despite reduced class sizes. This results in inefficient use of resources, with teachers allocated to groups smaller than intended, making curriculum delivery more difficult to organise consistently. If enrolment continues to

fall, the school's long-term viability will be at risk, with potential pressures on staffing, morale, and retention."

18. The Local Authority supports the School's request for a reduction in PAN and confirmed that if the reduction is approved it will have sufficient YR places in the planning area.

19. The Diocese also supports the School's request. It said:

"With the falling birthrate in the area, the school needs to reduce its PAN in order to restructure and ensure financial and education effectiveness going forward."

20. 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 45 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.

21. With regard to parental preference, I wish to note here that the national closing date for applications to YR in September 2026 was 15 January 2026. This means that most parents who require a place in YR for their child will have already applied. Parents who have applied for a place at the School will have done so on the basis that the PAN is 45 and they are likely to have used that information when assessing their chances of securing a place at the School. By requesting a reduction in PAN at this point in the year, I must give particular consideration to parental preference and whether there is a likelihood of parents being disappointed. However, I must also note that admission authorities cannot give a guarantee that parental preferences for a school place will be met.

22. 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 South planning area of the Local Authority. There are seven schools in this planning area, including the School, which admit children into YR.

23. Table 1 summarises data about school places sent to me by the School but provided by the Local Authority. For the schools in the planning area, it includes the number of children admitted to YR in each of the previous three years; and forecast data for 2026.

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

	2023	2024	2025	2026
The sum of the PANs across the area	435	435	405	405
The number of children admitted to YR or forecast to be admitted	354	377	355	360
The number of vacant places	81	58	50	45
The number of vacant places as a percentage of the total number of places	18.6	13.3	12.3	11.1

24. Table 1 shows that there has been a 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”. The proportion of vacant places in the planning area would remain higher than two per cent if I were to agree to the proposed variation for September 2026.

25. For 2026/27, the Local Authority has kindly provided me with information about the number of applications received by schools within the planning area for a YR place. As of 15 January 2026, the national closing date for primary school applications, the Local Authority had received 280 applications (based on the number of parental first preferences). This compares to 334 such applications in 2025; 315 in 2024 and 295 in 2023. Historically, the number of children admitted to YR is larger than this initial figure by between 21 and 62 children. However, it is unlikely to be higher than the Local Authority’s predicted figure of 360 places.

26. Based on the information shown in Table 1 and that subsequently provided by the Local Authority, 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.

27. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. Table 2 summarises recent admissions to the School and includes the number of applications received, as of 15 January 2026, for admission in September 2026.

Table 2: The number of children admitted to YR at the School or forecast to be admitted in 2026

	2023	2024	2025	2026
The PAN for the School	45	45	45	45
The number of first preferences	34	34	31	26
The number of children admitted to YR	45	41	31	-
The number of vacant places	0	4	14	19
The number of vacant places as a percentage	0	8.9	31.1	42.2

28. Table 2 shows that the number of parents selecting the School as their first preference for a YR place for their child has declined since 2024 and that the number of children admitted to the School has fallen considerably since 2023.

29. It is worth noting that, for all the schools in the planning area, the number of first preference applications received for places in September 2026 is lower than those received in 2025. Based on the number of first preferences alone, none of the schools in the planning area would reach their PAN.

30. Given the recent pattern of applications, it is likely that the great majority of parents 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, there are more than 15 other schools admitting children to YR within two miles of the School, I am assured that a reduction in PAN is likely to result in minimal frustration of parental preference.

31. Information on the School's website shows that there are currently 14 classes in the School, including some single age classes and some mixed age classes. From information provided by the School, current class sizes vary considerably.

32. In relation to the proposed reduction in PAN, the School stated:

“The intake for reception would be limited to 30. If the reduction is not approved, we could be in the same position as we are in this year with 32 children, which requires the same staffing as we would need for 60 children, this is not financially sustainable.”

33. It also said that a PAN of 30 would:

“enable more targeted teaching because the classes will be composed of the single age group and we will be more financially viable. It will enable better staff morale.”

34. The FBIT website shows that over the last two years, as the number of pupils at the School has started to decline, there has been a negative effect on the School's finances. At the end of the financial year 2024-2025, the School had an in-year balance of -£48 thousand.

35. The School is affected by the provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Size) (England) Regulations 2012 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 schoolteacher except in specific exceptional circumstances. The infant class size regulations apply to Year R, Year 1 and Year 2.

36. As schools are largely funded based on the number of pupils on their rolls, and the highest cost to a school budget is its staff. Most infant and primary schools aim to have around 30 pupils to a class. If a school has classes that are less than 30, this can mean that the income from the number of pupils is less than the costs of providing a class. When this happens over several classes, a school can face significant financial challenges.

37. If the PAN remains at 45, 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 45 children have been admitted. 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.

38. I must balance the impact that reducing the School's PAN could have on meeting parental preference with the future financial viability of the School.

39. In summary, with a PAN of 30, all the families who have chosen the School as their first choice for a place for their child in September 2026 would be highly likely to secure that place. Based on current figures, four places would remain for other children. None of the other schools in the area are currently oversubscribed so there would be places available in other schools locally. Additionally, as stated earlier, admission authorities cannot give a guarantee that parental preferences will be met. Due to the Infant Class Size Regulations, admitting more than 30 children could have a significant impact on the School's financial situation should they have to rearrange classes and employ additional staffing.

40. 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

41. 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 Christ the King Catholic Primary School for 2026/27.

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

Dated: 20 January 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Catherine Crooks