



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference:	VAR2678 and VAR2679
Admission Authority:	The Governing Body for St Monica's Catholic Primary School
Local Authority:	Warrington Borough Council
Date of decision:	11 February 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 St Monica's Catholic Primary School, for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number will be 20; and that for the reception year in 2025/26 academic year, the published admission number will be varied to 20.

The referral

1. The Governing Body (the Admission Authority) has referred to the adjudicator proposals for variations to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for St Monica's Catholic Primary School (the School) for 2025/26 and 2026/27.
2. The School is a voluntary aided school for children aged four to eleven in Warrington, Cheshire. It is a co-educational non-selective school. It is located in the Warrington Borough Council local authority area (the LA).
3. The religious character of the School is Roman Catholic. The religious authority for the School is Shrewsbury Diocese (the Diocese)
4. Parties to the request are the Admission Authority, the LA, and the Diocese.
5. The proposed variations are that the published admission numbers (PANs) be reduced from 30 to 20 for admissions to Reception Year (YR) in the academic year beginning in September 2026, and from 30 to 20 for the remainder of the current academic year which began in September 2025.

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 23 November 2023 for 2025/26, and 19 November 2024 for 2026/27.

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

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

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

- the referral from the Admission Authority dated 19 December 2025 and supporting documents;
- the determined Arrangements for 2025/26 and 2026/27 and the proposed variations to those Arrangements;
- responses from the LA, the School, and the Diocese to my requests for further information;
- maps 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)).

11. I would like to extend my thanks to the School, LA 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 admission 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 been consulted upon but have not yet been determined. This means that if I decide to vary the Arrangements for 2026/27 by reducing the PAN from 30 to 20 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for 2027/28 and subsequent years.

14. 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

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 certain other limited and specified circumstances. I will consider below whether the proposed variation is justified by the change in circumstances.

16. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN for entry into YR be reduced from 30 to 20 pupils. It has been aware of demographic decline and had already taken steps to mitigate the financial challenges this will bring. Steps taken include restructuring staff patterns, collapsing classes, and managing a budget to deal with an in-year deficit. The financial recovery plan was on track at the point that the arrangements for 2025/26 and 26/27 were determined. Historically pupil numbers have remained consistently below 20 in each year, but above 15, enabling the School to operate sustainably within a mixed-age class structure, without needing to formally reduce the PAN. Pupil number forecasts indicated that the pattern would continue so there was no justification at that time to initiate a PAN reduction consultation through the normal admissions process.

17. The Admission Authority told me that the reason for it seeking a variation for the School is that since the arrangements were determined:

“Several major and unanticipated changes of circumstance have occurred. The government's increase to employer National Insurance contributions has created a substantial and unplanned rise in staffing costs. At the same time, actual admissions have diverged markedly from the forecasts provided. We have received significantly more in-year transfer requests than anticipated, which has pushed our infant classes close to a total capacity for 60 pupils for our combined class structure. In addition, we have admitted a sudden increase of pupils with high needs SEND where EHCP funding was not secured at admission, or where the funding does not meet the level of provision required. These

combined pressures have created an immediate strain on staffing capacity and placed further unplanned pressure on the school budget”.

18. 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.

19. The LA supports the variation request and states that;

“the LA’s duty to provided sufficient places in the area will be satisfied if the variation is agreed. At present there are a combined 180 places available for reception entry in 2026; and only 139 applications have been received as of primary school closing date on 15th January 2026. Hence a surplus of 41 places or 23%.”

Table 1: The number of school places in the planning area and number of children who have applied (First preferences) and have been admitted for each school for YR in the last two years.

	PAN	2024/25 First preferences	2024/25 Admissions	2025/26 First preferences	2025/26 Admissions
St Monica’s	30*	17	18	15	18
The Cobbs Infant School	60	47	53	44	49
St Thomas’	30	34	30	29	30
Stockton Heath	60	49	52	54	54
Total	180	147	153	142	151

* Proposed PAN variation to 20 for 2026/27 reduces total capacity by 10 places to 170.

20. Table 1 illustrates that the demand for places has been significantly below the number of places available in the planning area for the past two years. I am therefore satisfied that if the PAN variation is agreed, it will not prevent the LA from fulfilling their statutory duty to ensure enough places are available.

21. 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. Additionally, infant class sizes are limited to 30 (as set out in The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 and in paragraph 2.16 of the Code). In classes of less than 30, the cost of a teacher and the resources necessary for an infant class, (when compared to, say, a junior or secondary school teacher / class (where numbers are not

limited), has to be borne by a proportionately smaller income from the children admitted to infant classes.

22. I am satisfied that the number of places available compared to the number of children being admitted means that parental preference is unlikely to be frustrated in 2026/27 as places will be available at other schools within the planning area. I am also satisfied that any in-year applicants for places in 2025/26 will be able to secure places at schools within the planning area.

23. The Dioceses fully supports the proposed variation confirming that:

“Following recent communications with the Admissions Authority, the Diocese is assured that the requested variation will see the school’s current provision for its Catholic life and mission retained, with no detriment to students already on roll. The Diocese is also satisfied that there will be no impact on other local Catholic schools”.

24. It was clear from the data provided by the Admission Authority, that the LA has a picture of recent / projected demand in schools in its planning areas. It appeared to me that the matter raised in respect of the PAN at the School and the number of surplus places in the planning area projected for 2026/27 would have been obvious in enough time for what has been requested to have been dealt with through the consultation process prior to the determination of the Arrangements. I raised this concern with Admission Authority. Its response was:

“The school has experienced a sustained decline in Reception admissions over several years, consistent with the local authority forecasting and wider demographic trends lined to falling birth rates. Throughout this period, governors and leaders have carefully monitored NOR data, modelled multiple scenarios, and implemented proportionate internal mitigations rather than making premature changes to admission arrangements. These mitigations have included restructuring class organisation to mixed-age provision and reducing staffing through natural turnover, thereby avoiding redundancies, and maintaining educational quality.

At earlier stages, these measures were expected to be sufficient and retaining a PAN of 30 allowed flexibility to respond to in-year admissions, sibling demand, and anticipated local housing development. However, over successive admission cycles, Reception intakes have remained significantly below PAN, cohort sizes have become increasingly small and volatile and external factors – including the redistribution of pupils following Pan increases at neighbouring schools, such as Grappenhall Heys Primary School during a period of declining overall demand – have further reduced the reliability of a PAN of 30 as a realistic planning assumption.”

25. The requested variations for both 2025/26 and 2026/27 relate to the School’s ability to continue with their current class structures for KS1 where they have introduced mixed age groups. The school is regulated by the provision of the School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (England) Regulations 2012 (the infant class size regulations) that require classes of

children aged five, six or seven in the academic year must not contain more than 30 pupils with a single qualified teacher, except in specific exceptional circumstances.

26. I have considered the impact of decreasing admission numbers on school finances. In 2024/25 the School had an in-year balance of -£47,801 and revenue reserve position of £33,427. The School have provided further information illustrating a worsening financial position if the PAN reduction is not agreed, that will inevitably impact on the resources available to support the quality of education for children in the School. They have agreed a deficit recovery plan with the LA that is, in part, based on planning assumptions related to the reduced PANs for 2025/26 and 2026/27 and the ability to maintain a reduced number of classes overall.

27. The Governing Body emphasises that the PAN reductions reflect the “reality of how the school is currently operating in response to sustained lower demand, rather than the withdrawal of places”. The PAN reductions will provide greater planning certainty in relation to in-year admissions for 2025/26 and admissions for 2026/27 and consequently financial sustainability.

28. Having balanced the financial impact of reducing the PANs for 2025/26 and 2026/27 against any adverse impact this may have on meeting parental preference, I am satisfied that the PAN reductions are justified.

29. The Admission Authority has presented a compelling argument for the variations it proposes. I accept that the LA will be able to manage school places in the planning area by reducing the PANs for 2025/25 and 2026/27 at the School.

30. I agree that the PAN for the School shall be reduced from 30 to 20 for the remainder of 2025/26 and for the academic year 2026/27, and therefore a PAN of 20 will form the baseline for subsequent years (if the Arrangements for 2027/28 have yet to be determined on the date of my determination here and as set out below).

31. 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 2027/28 than it currently expects to, there remains the capacity in the building for it to do so.

Determination

32. 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 Monica’s Catholic Primary School, for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

33. I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number will be 20; and that for the reception year in 2025/26 academic year, the published admission number will be varied to 20.

Dated: 11 February 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Mr Philip Lloyd