



Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Determination

Case reference: VAR2673

Admission Authority: Central Bedfordshire Council for Thomas Johnson Lower School

Date of decision: 12 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 Central Bedfordshire Council for Thomas Johnson Lower School for 2026/27.

I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number will be 15.

The referral

1. Central Bedfordshire Council (the Local Authority; the Admission Authority) has referred to the adjudicator a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements (the Arrangements) for Thomas Johnson Lower School (the School) for 2026/27.
2. The School is a co-educational, community school for children aged three to nine years in Lidlington, a village near Bedford.
3. Parties to the request are the Local Authority and the Governing Body of the School.
4. The proposed variation is that the published admission number (PAN) be reduced from 30 to 15 for admissions to the Reception Year (Year R) 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 12 February 2025. 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.

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

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

- the referral from the Admission Authority (undated but submitted on 12 December 2025) and supporting documents, including: a letter sent to parents of children attending the School, by the Local Authority, in November 2025 (the Letter to Parents); and the minutes of a meeting of the Executive Committee of Central Bedfordshire Council on 1 August 2023 (the Executive Committee Minutes);
- the determined Arrangements for 2026/27 and the proposed variation to those Arrangements;
- responses from the Local Authority to my requests for further information;
- maps, including Google Maps and those showing the location of the School;
- information I received during a meeting (the parties’ meeting) I convened on 6 February at 3pm, attended by the Local Authority and the School;
- information available on the websites of the School and the Local Authority; and
- information available on government websites including:
 - ‘Get Information About Schools’ (GIAS); and
 - ‘Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool’ (FBIT).

9. 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.

10. 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 30 to 15 as proposed, it will have the effect of forming the 'baseline' for subsequent years.

11. 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.

12. A document entitled "Admission Policy for Academic Year 2026/27" is published on the website of the School. This differs from the determined Arrangements supplied to me by the Local Authority. It is the Local Authority's responsibility, as the Admission Authority, to determine and publish the admission arrangements for the School. There can only be one set of admission arrangements for any given year, and the publication of any documents similar in title or content to the determined arrangements is likely to be contrary to the Code, including paragraph 14. I brought this matter to the attention of both parties at the parties' meeting.

Consideration of proposed variation

13. 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.

14. The Admission Authority has proposed that the PAN of the School is reduced from 30 to 15 for entry to YR in September 2026. The proposal has the support of the School. The referral gave the reason for seeking a variation as follows:

"The school is part of a reorganisation of schooling from 3 tier to 2 tier in the Cranfield/Marston Moretaine area of Central Bedfordshire.

It was initially identified that the school's PAN needed to be increased from 18 to 30 and a PAN of 30 was determined. In light of pupil forecasts with the school's change of age range the PAN needs to be reduced from 30 to 15.

It was initially identified that pupil numbers would increase with a new housing development in the area, hence the increase to PAN from 18 to 30.

However, this housing development is not expected until 2035 onwards and pupil forecasts indicate that numbers will be on average around 15 per year. As the school's accommodation is currently being expanded to accommodate their change of age range from lower to primary it is necessary to reduce their PAN to 15 to enable a prudent use of resources and school organisation."

15. I sought to understand why the current PAN was set as it had been. The Executive Committee Minutes record, in 2023, the decision, “Thomas Johnson Lower School to become a primary school”. In February 2025, the Local Authority determined the PAN of 30 for admissions in September 2026. In the parties’ meeting, the Local Authority explained that it had initially been decided that the School would be a one-form entry primary school for Year R to Year 6, with a PAN of 30. Subsequently, plans changed due to delayed housing developments and revised pupil forecasts. The Local Authority described a situation complicated by changes in personnel and to its internal processes since the PAN was determined.

16. The Letter to Parents provides further detail of the forthcoming reorganisation of the School:

“We are writing to update you about our plans to support your school’s transition to a primary school which will take place in September, as part of the change to the two-tier model of education across all schools in the Cranfield area.

The Council are investing a significant sum to ensure this area becomes two-tier with primary and secondary schools. As this is an enormous endeavour across a relatively large geographical area, it’s great that schools are keen to make this change, and we are now under a year away from that change happening for the start of the new school term in September 2026. . .

We are working with Thomas Johnson School to reconfigure the school from a Lower to a Primary school ready for next September 2026.

Part of this reconfiguration will also see the school reducing its published admission number from 30 places to 15 places. We are taking this step as pupil forecasts in the area show that this is the right number of places that we need at the school for the foreseeable future.

We have to go through a process of varying the school’s admission arrangements to reduce their published admission number from 30 to 15 by seeking approval from the Office of the School’s Adjudicator (OSA). We hope to get that approval by the end of the Spring term.

As the school will be reducing their admission number to 15 places per year group from September 2026, the Council will be reconfiguring spaces to ensure the transition of existing children at the school into Year 5 next September 2026 and then into Year 6 in September 2027 is seamless. Classrooms will be remodelled where required and will meet all the latest teaching standards.”

17. 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 30 to 15. 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.

18. The Local Authority has a duty to make sure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. It uses planning areas, which are geographical areas each containing a number of schools, for this purpose. In the planning area to which the School belongs, there are four schools (including the School) which admit pupils to Year R. Table 1, below, shows: the sum of the PANs at those schools; the number of children admitted in each of 2023, 2024 and 2025; and the number of children the Local Authority forecasts will be admitted in 2026. Table 1 also demonstrates the effect on surplus places of reducing the PAN of the School as has been proposed.

Table 1: School places in the planning area, and the number of children admitted, or forecast to require a place

	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Number of places in Year R in schools in the planning area (with a PAN of 30 for the School)	270	270	270	270	270
Number of children admitted (2023 – 2025); or forecast to be admitted or require a place (2026 – 2027)	236	245	230	231	228
Vacant places	34	25	40	39	42
Vacant places as a percentage of total places	12.6	9.3	14.8	14.4	15.6
Number of places in Year R if variation approved (with a PAN of 15 for the School)	270	270	270	255	255
Vacant places if variation approved	N/A	N/A	N/A	24	27
Vacant places as a percentage of total places if variation approved	N/A	N/A	N/A	9.4	10.6

19. As of 15 January 2026, the national closing date for primary school applications, the Local Authority had received 220 applications for a Year R place in the planning area (based on the number of parental first preferences). This compares to 225 such

applications in 2025, 255 in 2024 and 240 in 2023. In both 2023 and 2024 the number of children admitted to Year R in the planning area was below the number of first preference applications. In 2025, five more children were admitted than the number of first preference applications received. Taking all the data into account, it seems likely that the number of children admitted in 2026 will be within the forecast figure of 231.

20. 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. This helps to support parental choice, pupil population movement, and general manageability of the system”. I am satisfied that if the PAN of the School were to be reduced to 15 for 2026/27, there would be sufficient places available in the planning area for any children who might be seeking a Year R place.

21. I will now consider the demand for places at the School. As the closing date for applications to Year R has passed, most parents who require a place for their child will have already applied. I must therefore give particular consideration to parental preference and whether there is a likelihood of parents being disappointed. I note, however, that no admission authority can give a guarantee that parental preference will be met.

22. Table 2 summarises admissions to the School in 2024 and 2025, and includes the number of first preference applications received, as of 15 January 2026, for admission in September 2026.

Table 2: The number of first preference applications the School for each of 2024, 2025 and 2026; and the number of children admitted in 2024 and 2025.

	2024	2025	2026
The PAN for the School	18	30	15
Number of first preferences	12	15	21
Number of children admitted	14	17	N/A

23. Table 2 shows that in 2024 there were four vacant places at the School; in 2025 there were 13 vacant places. The Local Authority also supplied data which shows that 15 children are expected to be admitted to the School in 2027 and, if the PAN remains unchanged, 18 are forecast to be admitted in 2028. For 2026, parents of 21 children have expressed a first preference for the School. With the existing PAN of 30, all those children would be highly likely to secure a place. If the PAN is reduced as proposed, at least six will be denied a place.

24. Parents who have applied for a place at the School may have used the determined PAN of 30 when assessing their chances of securing a place. I cannot rule out the possibility that there is a group of parents who would have expressed a different set of preferences had a PAN of 15 for September 2026 been in place at the time they were making their decisions. I also note that although the Letter to Parents informed parents of

children already at the School of the proposed variation, this information was not available to all prospective parents. Further, those who did receive the letter may have been reassured by the statement in that, in respect of a PAN of 15, “this is the right number of places that we need at the school for the foreseeable future.”

25. 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. Children at the School are currently organised into five, single age classes (one each for Year R, Year 1, Year 2, Year 3 and Year 4). The plans for reorganisation to become a primary school are based on a move to mixed-age teaching. Children in Year R will continue to be taught as one, separate class whilst the other children will be taught in three, mixed-age classes (one class for Year 1 and Year 2 pupils, one for Year 3 and Year 4, and one class for Years 5 and 6). Capital works will take place to accommodate this, and the Local Authority provided details of those works.

26. There are currently 17 children on roll in Year R at the School. If, in 2026, 21 children were admitted, then in 2027 there would be (assuming no more children join or leave the School), 38 children in Years 1 and 2 combined. This figure is higher than the Infant Class Size limit and so these children could not be taught by a single teacher. If the PAN remains at 30, the Local Authority will also be required to admit to the School any child during the 2026/27 academic year whose parents request a Year R place, until 30 children have been admitted.

27. The FBIT website shows that at the end of the financial year 2024-2025, the School had an in-year deficit balance of -£71 thousand, and a revenue reserve of -£175 thousand. This financial situation would not support a model in which more than one teacher was required to be employed to teach a mixed-age class, as in the above example, and is a factor in the reorganisation of the School which should, as the Local Authority stated:

“enable the school to better organise classes, keeping within infant class size limits for Year R, 1 and 2 and deliver the curriculum effectively and efficiently within the school’s budget allocation.”

28. I have weighed this case carefully. In short, demand for 2026/27 and in future years is likely to be substantially below the current PAN. If the 21 children for whom the School is a first preference were admitted in September 2026, the planned reorganisation to become a primary school, including associated capital works, would be delayed by at least a year. I have noted that, for each of the three schools in the planning area other than the School, the number of first preference applications received for September 2026 is lower than the PAN. In other words, it seems likely that there will be surplus places at each of those schools and hence some choice for parents denied a place at the School. The Local Authority provided information showing the schools at which each of the six children displaced from the School, in the event that the PAN was reduced to 15, would be likely to

be offered a place. One child would be offered a place at their second preference school. The remaining five, four of whom did not express a second preference, would all be likely to be offered a place at their catchment school or the school which is the closest to their home.

29. Having considered all the matters above, my reasoning can be summarised as follows. If the proposed variation is approved, there will be some frustration of parental preference and some detriment to a small number of children who will not be admitted to the school which would otherwise be their highest available preference. However, if the proposed variation is not approved, there will be a significantly negative financial and organisational impact on the School and Local Authority, with delays to the transition to full primary age provision and the capital works required.

30. After carefully weighing the above factors, I consider that it is reasonable to conclude that the proposed variation is justified by the circumstances. I approve the proposed variation to reduce the PAN for 2026/27 to 15.

Determination

31. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Central Bedfordshire Council for Thomas Johnson Lower School for 2026/27.

32. I determine that for admission in 2026/27 the published admission number will be 15.

Dated: 12 February 2026

Signed:

Schools Adjudicator: Jennifer Gamble